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Since launch in 2007, iOS has laid down the new agenda for portable gaming, leaving legacy players such as Nintendo on the ropes. On p76 we look at how Apple did it, and identify the 50 best games to play today on iPhone and iPad



CORE GAMING

APPLE REDEFINED INTERFACE, AUDIENCE AND DISTRIBUTION. WHAT'S NEXT?

HYPE

ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

FINAL FANTASY XIII-2

SOUL CALIBUR V

I AM ALIVE



PS VITA POWER

UNCHARTED LEADS A KILLER LAUNCH LINE-UP



In mobile gaming, the little things mean a lot

By the time this edition of **Edge** is in your hands, Sony's PlayStation Vita will have been released into the wild – at least in some territories. Western players may have to hold on a little longer yet, but our time with the hardware suggests that it will be worth the wait. And so it should be. Having burned through five distinct iterations of PSP since the console's introduction seven years ago, Sony has accumulated a tremendous amount of experience in the field of portable gaming, learning some difficult lessons along the way. The new console offers best-in-class rendering performance, two thumbsticks, optional 3G connectivity, and, crucially, a software library courtesy of some of the world's most talented game developers (see p10). And that's just for starters. Could this be the first console launch in recent memory to hit the mark on every count?



Well, no. The dirty little fly squatting in this particular jar of ointment is the proprietary memory card that has been built for the platform. Since the base Vita hardware has no onboard memory, and because this is a device on which you'll want to save game progress as well as download full titles, a memory card will be a necessity – and, importantly, a potentially costly one, with variants ranging from 4GB at $20 to 32GB at $120. That's against SD card equivalents that can be picked up for $5 to $30.

Apple's portable devices do not require memory cards. A memory card port would risk spoiling those carefully sculpted iPhone lines, after all. It is a simple difference but a telling one. One of these devices complicates the issue of play before you've even given it a proper test drive; the other simply functions as you'd hope – no, make that *expect* – it would.

It's born of Apple's desire to make the most elegant user experiences in the business (let's conveniently overlook clunky old iTunes for the moment), but it's only one factor behind the company's success in videogames. On p76 we look at the scale of that success, and consider what lies ahead.



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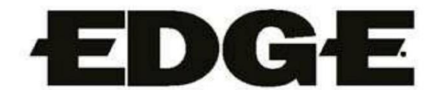
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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



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What can you expect from Sony's PlayStation Vita hardware (1) when it arrives on European shores in January? In this issue's opening Knowledge story, SCEE president and CEO Jim Ryan talks about the desire to attract female players, the challenges of promoting the hardware, and the company's long-term strategy. We also report from extensive hands-on sessions with the early games set to bring the system to life. Injecting liveliness into gaming is also the goal of Spov, the CGI studio behind the cutscenes in *Modern Warfare* (2) – we meet its lead creatives on p16. More slickly realised action ensues on p18, where Eutechnyx reveals the social networking core and investment grunt behind *Auto Club Revolution* (3), a free-to-play racing game built with the company's acclaimed attention to detail. On p20, Sony steps into the limelight again once more with its HMZ-T1 visor (4), a device that offers an innovative way to consume stereoscopic 3D content, including games. Then on p22 we meet artist Xoan Baltar (5), who with *Katana Jack* has embraced Apple's iPad as a game-making tool. The forthright views of writer/director Frank Miller (6) are shared in Soundbytes on p24, while on p26 American musician DJ Shadow (7) casts his mind back to the arcade games, such as *Robotron*, that formed a key part of his childhood, and recalls the lessons those formative years taught him.



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Up-to-the-minute
game news and views



PS Vita prepares for Euro lift-off

With a roster of diverse games in the wings, launch conditions look good for Sony's feature-packed kit



In its final form, PS Vita is surprisingly lightweight, clocking in at 260g for the Wi-Fi model and about 280g for the 3G version. For comparison's sake, Nintendo's 3DS weighs in at about 230g



Jim Ryan, president and CEO, SCEE

With Vita having made its debut in Japan and other parts of Asia, all eyes are now on its February 22 Euro launch. Sony Computer Entertainment Europe president and CEO **Jim Ryan** is keenly aware of key of the differences in the approach to each region. "The big difference is obviously the content experiences that people seem to go for in Japan are really rather different to what appeals in the west," he says. "And it seems like that divergence is greater in the handheld space than it is on traditional TV-based consoles. You've got your *Monster Hunter* phenomenon over there, which never really happened to anything like the same extent in the west. All that being said, the end-of-the-line business approach is pretty consistent."

There's a notable consistency in the software launch lineup for each region, too, albeit with a few tweaks – Japan gets home-grown titles such as *Army Corps Of Hell* and *Ridge Racer*, whereas Euro regions get *Reality Fighters* and *Wipeout 2048*, for example. All territories are bearing witness to Sony's digital content commitment, too. "There is strong emphasis on digital all around the world," Ryan asserts. "I think the nature of the environment over there [in Japan] makes digital a little easier than in some of the markets in Europe in which we operate, in which the digital way of life is not as well established."

Firing it up shows that Vita is gunning for a wider audience than any Sony platform before it



Sony's Vita preview event, held in London at the end of November, had little difficulty attracting attendees

At Sony's pre-launch Vita event in London, it's clear there's not yet a 100 per cent investment in digital delivery. The lessons learnt through the difficult rollout of the PSP Go hardware still linger on.

Though all physical retail releases will be available for download, there are exceptions in digital-only titles such as *Sound Shapes* and *Gravity Rush*, two of the platform's most striking and appealing early offerings (see facing page for hands-on previews). Such high-profile productions highlight SCE's continued drive in the download market, and also underline a more specific and strategic targeting of content. It extends to 'smaller' productions, too, with Sony welcoming app-style games such as Capybara Games' *WarioWare*-style *Frobisher Says* and app developer Bolser's AR city-tagging game *Tag*.

While Sony hasn't yet caved in to price points outside of its established PSN brackets, the presence of casual games such as *Frobisher Says* suggests a widening scope for software on Vita. Picking up the final hardware model and firing up its frontend reinforces the fact that Vita is gunning for a wider audience than any Sony platform before it. The Welcome Park is a built-in tutorial disguised as a series of minigames. From tapping numbers sequentially to rearranging your photos in tile puzzles, the games are designed to rope in casual players intimidated by hardware that has more than a passing resemblance to its predecessor – a platform that dabbled with the casual market thanks to initiatives such as PlayStation Minis.

It's part of a grand plan to engage a wider audience with Vita, one that will kick in more aggressively after launch. "Day-one [buyers are] going be our good old core gaming demographic: mid-20s, largely male. What we will look to do is go younger rather more quickly and more deliberately than we did with PSP," Ryan explains. "You won't see that so much in 2012, and in 2013 we'll still be very much at the core of it, but shortly after that a lot of the business strategy will be [based] around targeting a somewhat younger demographic."

Those day-one buyers have an important decision to make – 3G or not 3G? Ryan sees the £230 Wi-Fi flavour as the potential frontrunner for early sales over its £280 3G-toting brother. "Our belief is that 3G will be attractive to a very large number of consumers, but that Wi-Fi will just shade it," he says. "All that said, we pride ourselves on our business nimbleness and we'll adjust very quickly if we've called that wrong."

Ryan's reasoning is simple: the price. But he sees it as Sony's job to get the





Reality Fighters makes use of Vita's built-in camera, enabling players to map their faces on to fighters and use their surroundings as the stage



www.bit.ly/tP6onw
The Vita story so far



TOUCH MY KATAMARI

The name might encourage use of the touchscreen, but Namco Bandai's game is more intuitive with Vita's analogue sticks. The visual and audio design do service to the PS2 originals, and while creator Keita Takahashi left Namco long ago, his legacy is honoured in this new entry that introduces rear touch Katamari stretching. It's encouraging to see a cult series make an appearance this early on in Vita's life.

Publisher: Namco Bandai **Developer:** In-house



UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS

The latest level to be shown off by Sony's Bend Studio is the polar opposite of the airy platforming sections that unveiled Drake's portable debut. Set in a burning jungle warehouse, the lighting effects are a sight to behold. Drake's animations as he leaps, swings and clings to pipes and ledges perfectly capture the character's signature moves. It's a shame the intimate, gripping scene is followed up by some rote sniping.

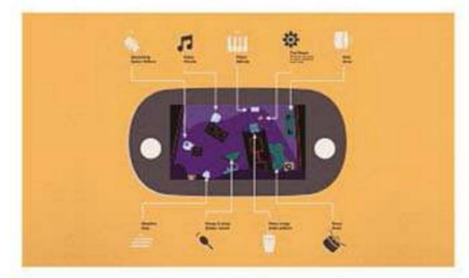
Publisher: SCE **Developer:** Bend Studio



VIRTUA TENNIS 4

Up there with *Golden Abyss* for graphical fidelity to its console namesake, *Virtua Tennis 4* is crisp, colourful and creative with the touchscreen. Tapping to launch a ball skywards, tapping again to choose your mark on the court, and swiping to move your player makes *Virtua Tennis* the most inviting and user-friendly it has ever been. It serves the series into a sweet spot between console looks and app-like simplicity.

Publisher: Sega **Developer:** In-house



SOUND SHAPES

Jonathan *Everyday Shooter* Mak's audio-based platformer is the indie star in Vita's first wave of titles. Recent previews have shied away from showing off the team's levels, preferring to highlight the intricate level editor. Creating a music sheet by dragging and dropping sounds on to level backgrounds and then adding enemies and platforms with the touchscreen is simple – it's perfect for amateur game designers.

Publisher: SCE **Developer:** Queasy Games



GRAVITY RUSH

The most innovative game on Vita thus far, thirdperson adventure *Gravity Rush* is a comic book brought to life. Stages are filled with scalable skyscrapers and fetch quest or combat objectives. The twist? Tapping the right shoulder button triggers antigravity mode. Then tilt the console or adjust the right thumbstick and tap again to launch yourself in the direction you've aimed. Whatever you land on is your new floor.

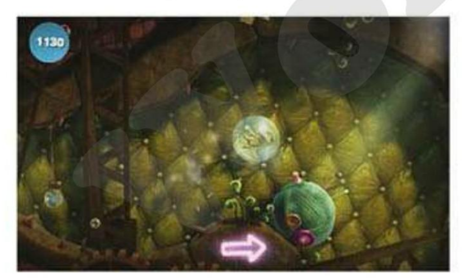
Publisher: SCE **Developer:** SCE Japan Studio



MOTORSTORM RC

Evolution Studios has taken a surprise turn with its mud-and-mayhem racing brand. While it now revolves around RC vehicles, though, all of the series' classes, from big rigs to buggies, are included. Connectivity between Vita and PS3 – buying the game grants universal access across both – is the most intriguing prospect, and the 'Pitwall', *Evolution*'s version of *Need For Speed*'s Autolog, aims to establish a community.

Publisher: SCE **Developer:** Evolution Studios



LITTLEBIGPLANET

The hope, clearly, is that *LittleBigPlanet* will open Vita's potential to create and engage a community of fans. User-generated content is spearheading Sony's agenda and with good reason: the power of Vita allows a breadth and quality that its PSP predecessor can't match. The chance to create custom minigames employing Vita's broad suite of features is tantalising.

Publisher: SCE **Developer:** Tarsier Studios, Double Eleven



SUPER MONKEY BALL

It's no shock to find that Sega's monkey-rolling sim is the best early use of Vita's gyroscopic tech. Tilting the console to roll your primate-in-a-ball around the mazes is nerve-wracking thanks to Vita's sensitivity and Sega's cunning, often cruel, level design. The brand has had an uneven journey since its birth in Japanese arcades, but Vita seems like an effective home.

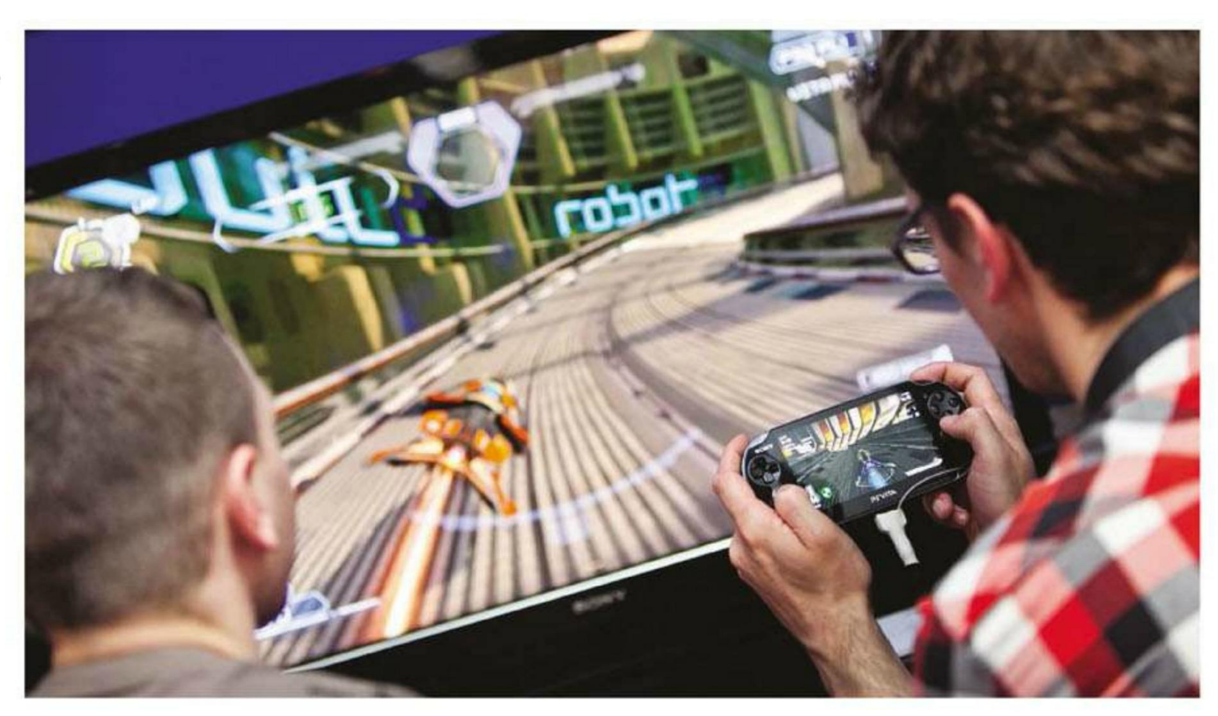
Publisher: Sega **Developer:** In-house



RESISTANCE: BURNING SKIES

Perhaps the least inspiring title here, *Resistance* still ticks the FPS box, showing that Vita's twin sticks are capable of supporting a portable shooter with ease. Things get tricky in the use of touchscreen commands and swipes (to throw grenades, for example), which combine awkwardly with the traditional controls. It's a technically accomplished game, nevertheless.

Publisher: SCE **Developer:** Nihilistic Software



Wipeout 2048 **supports simultaneous Vita/PS3 play. Alongside the game at Euro launch will be fellow firstparty titles *Uncharted: Golden Abyss, Reality Fighters, ModNation Racers: Road Trip, MotorStorm RC, Little Deviants, Everybody's Golf, Escape Plan, Top Darts, Hustle Kings* and *Unit 13***

CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

SCEE president and CEO Jim Ryan is positive about Sony's infrastructure, but realistic about the challenges facing a modern videogame empire. "The world around us is changing so fast in so many ways," he says, "that any organisation that is going to survive – let alone prosper – has to be able to change just to reflect what's going on around it. That's probably true of this industry more than most others. Yes, we do need to retain that ability to be very nimble, to be very proactive, to evolve very fast. But I think we have the basic building blocks within [Sony] to do that."

3G message out there: "It is a £50 premium [for the 3G model], and there is then whatever commitment the consumer enters with Vodafone. All that said, we see a significant proportion going for 3G. It's very interesting, a lot of [Vita's] features and functionality – when you actually get into them – there's some really interesting stuff there that 3G will really enhance. It's our job to communicate those features and evangelise it properly, and hope that consumers embrace it."

3G opens the gateway to more fully explore Vita's portable potential, and apps such as Twitter and Flickr should catch the eye of social networking fans. Using Vita as a keyboard with your thumbs proves surprisingly comfortable, too, and while SCE may be adamant it's not competing with smartphones, such a feature draws comparisons with Android and iOS handsets. It's Sony's proprietary Near that shines brightest on Vita's app horizon, though. A GPS map of your surroundings with icons indicating nearby friends and Vita users, Near fuses Mii Plaza and StreetPass-style functions into a simple, effective touchscreen context.

"Rear touch needs to be very carefully worked into game design. But it's widely employed by developers"

Vita's user-friendliness is laying the foundation for SCE to target a female audience it's previously struggled to connect with, too. "That [audience] is obviously the untapped holy grail," Ryan says. "We're hopeful that the rather less-intimidating interface possibilities that Vita offers may make that market potentially more accessible. Some of the things as yet unrevealed on the content side are exploring that."

There's a distinct sense that Vita is starting from scratch, mostly ignoring Sony's previous handheld endeavour yet acknowledging its mistakes. Ryan identifies the disconnect: "At the essence of it, PSP is not a true digital device in the way that Vita is. So trying to create some kind of seamless mechanic to build a bridge between the two is fundamentally difficult."

Even if Vita is a new start, Ryan is clearly aware of the tough sell of its more unusual features. "Rear touch needs to be very carefully worked into game design," he explains. "It's a very nice, unique feature, but it's not something that can be used indiscriminately, because obviously you've got the issue of you don't exactly know where your finger is unless you're gifted with some sixth or seventh sense. But it's very widely employed [by developers]. For someone like me, who's basically a poor gamer, I can play *Uncharted* using touch functionality. Someone who is a very proficient and accomplished gamer can play more conventionally and enjoy it at a different level. You talk about accessibility and broadening out to different target markets – that all talks to that [issue] as well."

Key to getting Vitas in hands is, of course, the software. A recent hands-on session with Vita's promised European launch titles (and some in the hazier 'launch window' slot), reveal a breadth of content that ticks the genre boxes you'd expect of both home and portable console platforms. And that's before mentioning games that rely on Vita's unique feature set. Our selection of the games to watch (see previous page) demonstrates how variety is at the core of Sony's Vita mission. ■

War stories

We meet Spov, the CGI specialist behind Modern Warfare's cutscenes

How to tell *Modern Warfare's* sweep of rapidly exploding global conflict? Its tightly contained levels, while driven by sensational set-pieces, hardly attempt to spin the tale of international intrigue and personal strife, Machiavellian villains and gruff special forces operatives.

Instead, it's down to Spov, the east-London-based CGI house that has created the inter-level cutscenes for all the *Call Of Duty* games since *Modern Warfare*. The team has, as executive producer **Dan Higgott** says, one per cent of the screen time and 80 per cent of the story to tell. Its cutscenes are rarely more than a minute of swooping wireframe graphics, exploding glass, growling CO voiceover and gleaming taskforce medal, but they have the inestimable job of describing the impact of previous events, what you're doing next, where you're going, and why.

They do a lot more besides, overlaying maps with visualisations of the places in which you'll be fighting and military ordnance you'll be bringing to bear – or forced to face – as well as hints about the characters' backstories and motivations. "But that's less important than getting the basic information across," Higgott says. "Even in a tightly on-rails game like *Modern Warfare*, it's not that easy to get a lot of narrative points across."

> "Even in a tightly on-rails game like Modern Warfare, it's not easy to get a lot of narrative points across"

Short, sharp and paced at the same blistering rate as the rest of the action, the cutscenes despatch you to the next boiling point so briskly that you'll find yourself immersed in another level before the adrenaline of the previous one has eased off. It's therefore difficult to understand how an external contractor working thousands of miles away from the development studios – in the case of *Modern Warfare 3*, Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer Games in California – can produce such coherent results.

"Sometimes we get builds of the game to play," says design director **Yugen Blake**. "We didn't get them this time, because it was such a secretive project, but [we] did get game capture. Even with the early builds, you get an understanding of how fast the gameplay is, and it's a firstperson action game – slow animations of globes and 3D aren't going to get the information across and aren't going to be interesting to look at. So you have to keep it pacy and dynamic."

Spov began work on *MW3* in spring 2011, submitting video for tweaks in early August and completing in the first week of September. The developers provided scripts for each scene, which included voiceover and a general direction – sometimes just a half-page of notes that it was up to Spov to fill in. The length of each video, though, was partly dictated by available disc space; their total length in *MW3* is around 15 minutes. "We wanted to be as punchy and direct as possible, to cut out any fat," Higgott says. "If we could lose two seconds, we would to really sharpen it as much as possible…"

Early development was about differentiating *MW3's* two factions – Soap and Price's covert and Delta's conventional operations – because the developers felt simple palette changes weren't enough. Soap and Price's sequences emphasise their on-the-ground activities. "We created this movable world of maps and Post-It notes; they're in a hotel or safehouse somewhere, putting their intel on a board," says Higgott.





Spov executive producer Dan Higgott (top) and design director Yugen Blake



"The intel board was an idea we came up with fairly early on," Blake explains. "[The game's] Delta advisor, a guy called Dalton Fury, was reading through some of our development notes and said, 'We used this, guys. If you want to use it as a tool, go for it'."

For Delta's levels, the cutscenes highlight computer interfaces and the pixels of LCD screens: "We imagined that you're a general and there's a control room somewhere with all this information in it to allow you to make decisions. It's a fictional perfect bubble in which everything is functional and correct, without any of the glitchiness and problems in real technology."

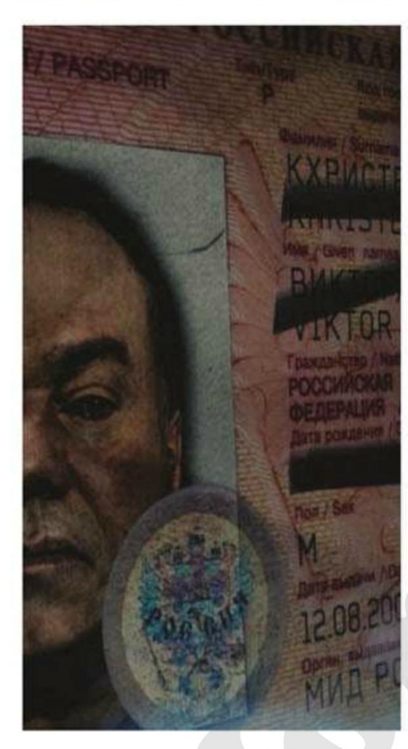
Fictional's key, though: the screens are embellished with data readouts and other details. "The point about military tech is that it serves a purpose, but from an animation point of view it looks awful, especially the stuff that's evolving at the moment," Blake says. "It looks so bad, so we really had to jazz it up and make it look sexy. But it needs plausibility."

Visual designer Mark Coleran calls the kinds of visualisation that Spov has created "fantasy user interfaces", or FUI (pronounced 'phooey'), a fitting name for *Modern Warfare's* artfully overcooked world. Just like the series' engine, its cutscenes present an impossibly perfect vision of war, melding hardware and drama with peak efficiency. "Ultimately it's entertainment and a bit of escapism," Higgott says. "It's the biggest game in the world. It's fun and bombastic, but it's also a very serious undertaking." ■



Higgott admits that *MW2* failed to achieve the right balance of lavish visuals and information delivery. "What you're doing and why is not there," he says

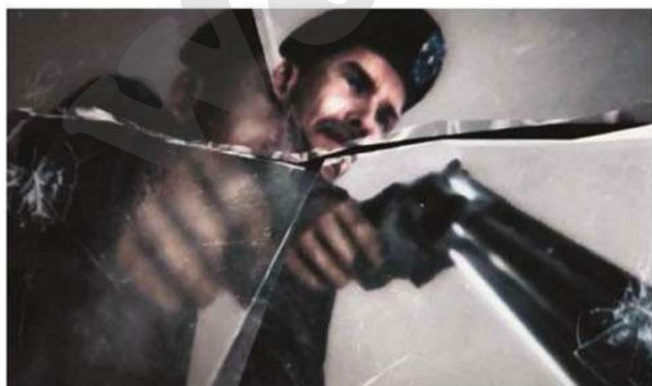






Soap and Price's scenes emphasise their fugitive status with temporary intel boards, while Delta's screen time provides a hi-tech contrast





Spov hadn't worked on a videogame project before Infinity Ward approached the studio, having seen its wireframe work in a Discovery programme entitled Future Weapons



COVERT OPERATIONS

Spov's mission to keep *MW3* secret



Security on *MW3* was tight, with scripts only printed for three core members of Spov's team and not allowed out of the building. The project and individual levels also had codenames, and since Spov's studio is on ground level, the blinds had to come down. So when bits of the story leaked in May, Spov came under scrutiny. "Literally as soon as," Higgott recalls. "It was of massive importance to Activision and everyone involved. And, fortunately, within a few hours, it was clear it wasn't anything to do with us, so we could relax. But it brought it home how serious it is."

The driving force

Veteran racing studio Eutechnyx shifts gears to bring console production values to the free-to-play space

Racing and the game marketplace have similar keys to success: in both, you have to be able to anticipate the twists and turns approaching so that you don't lose momentum when the course changes direction. Eutechnyx aims to do precisely this with its latest project, *Auto Club Revolution*, heeding the design principles of social media and free-to-play without sacrificing the production values expected from a developer that's worked on console racers for over a decade.

As challenging as it is to develop a quality racing sim, Eutechnyx's VP of marketing, **Simon Jones**, faces the hardest challenge: pitching it to consumers. After all, 'free-to-play' strikes the ears of hardcore gamers in much the same manner as screeching tyres after a handbrake turn. It conjures thoughts of lightweight Flash games and the whack-a-mole metagame of closing popups urging you to spend cash on microtransactions. How do you communicate that just because players can experience *ACR* for free, it doesn't mean the game feels cheap?

"The key mantra internally is 'no compromise'," Jones says. "It's never allowed to be said at any point of the design, 'Well, it's fine, it's free-to-play, let's do it that way.' It always has to be done best in class. Our target is to be the de facto standard for racing games on PC and certainly free-to-play."

While any marketing professional has a contractual obligation to make such claims, *ACR* goes a long way to justifying these ones. Two years ago, Eutechnyx took on $10 million (£6.3 million) in venture capital, and the effects are evident when we get up close with the game. They're found in the sun gleaming off the cherry-red bonnet of our 2008 BMW M3, the detailed textures on the pavement whizzing past, the realistic handling and note-perfect vehicle model, and the precision of the track.

> "Our target is to be the de facto standard for racing games on PC and certainly free-to-play"

You'd expect as much, given the developer's history in the racing genre, but the real genius of *ACR* lies in the custom-built social network that props up that game experience. It's only a matter of time before players start condensing the unwieldy moniker to a two-syllable nickname: *Racebook*.

"Our focus is to initially make a social network," Jones says. "A community for car fans built off the back of a really solid game, but create an environment where people have the freedom to say, 'You know what, I'll never race a car, but I'll spend all my time collecting every car I've ever owned in real life, or I'll customise them, and I'm going to win that metagame. I'm always going to have the coolest BMW'. And free-to-play brings those users in."

While the racing part of *ACR* will take place in a downloadable client, the social-media frontend will live in the browser. Eutechnyx has studiously adapted Facebook's principles – 'friending', live chat and messaging functionality, and the like – but added a set of customisation tools that will enable players to add both functional upgrades and cosmetic tweaks to their cars.


Simon Jones, VP of marketing, Eutechnyx

By placing this functionality in the browser, players will be able to access a significant slice of the experience from any computer connected to the Internet. A client is a necessary component for *ACR*, though, given that browser-based 3D tech isn't yet powerful enough to deliver a high-end-console-quality experience. The game will use a detailed racing physics simulation, but provide a range of options for players who want a more immediately accessible arcade feel.

The online nature of *ACR* will also enable Eutechnyx to update it organically, adding new cars and features on a whim without the need for users to bother with patches and updates. Nothing will be crippled for those who are unable or unwilling to pay, since players can earn credits through races and save up to buy nicer cars. Prices will vary according to make, but we're told that those who want to drop in and buy a top-tier supercar or exotic without getting any credits from races should expect to pay roughly £10.

If Eutechnyx succeeds in building a community of car fans in *ACR*, selling hot rods will be just one of many ways for it to make money. "There's a very interesting marketing platform for car companies, and they're prepared to pay good amounts of money to give content in *ACR* free to consumers," Jones says. "So, for us, we still monetise, but brilliantly, we don't monetise from the consumer."

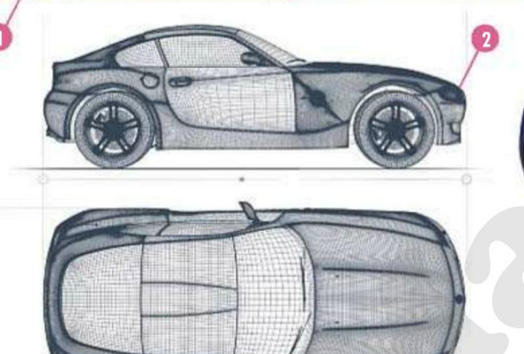
ACR's closed beta will run through the end of 2011, with an open beta scheduled for early 2012. ■


www.bit.ly/htimbe
Auto Club Revolution's home page



UNDER THE HOOD
***ACR*'s range of assets reveals Eutechnyx's attention to detail…**
1 The game part of *ACR* will run in a downloadable client, with console-style visual presentation. 2 Car manufacturers supply Eutechnyx with official CAD data to ensure car models are rendered authentically. 3 Owned cars will be viewable in-game and also in the Web browser as full 3D models using Unity3D tech. 4 You'll race on a mixture of real-life tracks (such as Daytona and Silverstone) and fictitious ones. 5 If black and grey are too subtle, you'll be able to customise, repaint and apply vinyls to cars in the customisation suite













DRIVING REVENUE

You play, the car companies pay

Eutechnyx already claims to have a deal in place with a yet-to-be-announced German car manufacturer, which will apparently make its next car available in *ACR* on the very day that it's announced, enabling players to take it out for a virtual joyride. As it stands, there's a significant gap between when cars are announced at a car show and when they're finally brought to market, so the hype-building advantages for the car maker seem obvious. The relationships Eutechnyx has built with the motor industry over the years will put the developer in an enviable position to earn revenue off the back of such promotions, too.



While it looks crisp and clutter-free on the outside, the underside of the visor hosts a range of options, with power and volume buttons grouped together with focus adjusters for each of the OLED screens. The forehead rest's dual function as a standby switch is the most ingenious design feature.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Sony's 3D-enabled headset makes blockbuster spectacle intimate

When we rounded up experts to discuss the future of gaming tech ('Flash Forward', **E**229), a recurring theme was how the way we view content would change. Fast forward a few months and we're donning Sony's HMZ-T1 headset. Described as a 'personal 3D viewer', the device contains two 0.7-inch OLED displays, which show HD content in stereoscopic 3D with pin-sharp clarity.

With the fixed nature of a headset, 3D viewing is consistent and undisturbed, making the HMZ-T1 an easy-to-use gateway to 3D gaming. As expected, *Uncharted 3* and *Killzone 3* currently provide the best demonstrations of how engaging the experience can be. With no distractions, no peripheral vision (clips can be attached to the underside of the device to block out other light sources), the experience is as intimate and private as renting out a cinema for the day. It helps that the headset is equipped with Sony's 'Virtualphones Technology', which delivers simulated – and punchy – 5.1 surround sound.

Heavy in the hand, the viewer is a surprisingly comfortable fit, with reclining or lying down the best way to avoid potential neck strain from extended sessions. Although the HMZ-T1 trades on efficiency rather than looks (regardless of its faux-futuristic neon blue light) there is a streak of design flair in the forehead rest, which is also a standby switch that detects when you remove the device and sends it into sleep mode.

While the HMZ-T1is seemingly perfect for viewing content away from your TV, the catch is that it requires a permanent connection to its processing unit, which is mains-powered only.

Ultimately it shows that there are still avenues to pursue in 3D gaming, and that OLED displays may be crucial to exploring them. If future iterations can render the conceit wireless, and the price is reduced from £800, we could end up looking back on the HMZ-T1as the start of a viewing revolution. ■

Finger painting

Apple's iPad is a great platform for consuming games, but Katana Jack shows it can play a role in making them too


Xoan Baltar, the lead artist behind *Katana Jack*'s lush paintings

CREATIVE LIMITS
If a game can be drawn on an iPad, can it not be coded too? Cascales says entire apps can be made with the device, including the art, the sound and even the programming. When asked why Ivanovich Games doesn't practise this method, he adds: "If you want to do a professional game with a full user experience, you need a computer. At least today."
Supplementary support for game making on Apple's device includes apps such as Dropbox, LogMeIn, Numbers and Penultimate.


www.bit.ly/vVnEjH
Katana Jack's App Store page

Katana Jack is more than a generic rehash of a much-loved game of yesteryear. This app showcases the process of game creation – the magic usually conjured behind the scenes.

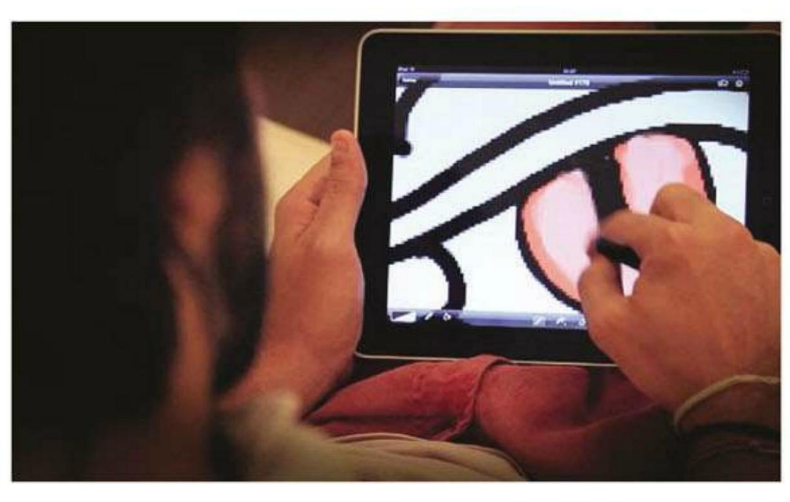
The game borrows unapologetically from Tehkan's 1984 classic *Bomb Jack*, in which a superhero leaps across a 2D landscape, disarming bombs suspended in front of famous landmarks. This spin features a critter in a jetpack against Japanese-themed watercolours.

The paintings – of ponds, temples and so on – are the work of Spanish artist **Xoan Baltar**, whose canvas is an iPad and the Brushes app. As *Katana Jack's* title screen proclaims, it's "the first game drawn on iPad." Probably because app making on an iPad seems impractical.

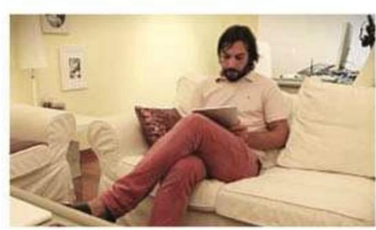
Blame Apple. The tech giant has made inroads segregating where we create content from where we consume it. The personal computer – with its expensive word- and image-processing programs – is reserved for work, and the iPad, a sleek touch surface connected to a repository of apps, is for entertainment.

Apple's most consumption-friendly device lacks the conveniences of a PC. Its screen is relatively small and imprecise, unable to register granular differences of pressure in the same way as a graphics tablet. Files are difficult to manage and export. Multitasking between many programs is a headache.

Baltar dismisses these issues. "The [graphics] tablet or the PC is often used," he says, "but we wanted to escape the traditional idea." In a promotional video for *Katana Jack*, the artist is seen reclining on a couch, iPad in hand. His workflow is almost zen-like, the antithesis of the stereotypical developer slouching over a keyboard and a can of Red Bull.






Xoan Baltar eschews the traditional computer room setup for a pristine white couch in a well-lit living space to produce his game artwork (left)

Baltar doesn't code. He leaves that to his boss, the CEO of Ivanovich Games, **Ivan Cascales**, who is more of a traditional PC user. In 2009, Cascales saw a video of Baltar's work with Brushes, which the artist used to create 'speed paintings' – a type of vignette popular on YouTube in which a painter records the process of creating a work of art using a video-capture program, then speeding up the footage in post-production. The result is the evolution of a full-blown image in a few minutes.

"I fell in love with this sort of making-of [video sequence]," Cascales explains. With Baltar, he set out to create a game in which a speed painting is shown, the final product being the level on which the game is played.

Witnessing the gameworld materialise before you, knowing that its creation occurred on a similar device thousands of miles away, feels strangely spiritual. Baltar takes the idea even further. "The sensation of touching the screen," he explains, "is something perhaps instinctual. Cave paintings were also made with the finger on the wall. Now, millions of years later, I'm still finger painting, but on a digital display."


UNCHARTED 3
DRAKE'S DECEPTION
"UNCHARTED 3 IS INCREDIBLE AND GOD ONLY KNOWS HOW THIS CAN EVER BE IMPROVED ON"
10/10 PlayStation. Official Magazine - UK
OUT NOW
PS3
UNCHARTED 3
DRAKE'S DECEPTION
PS3
PlayStation 3
SONY
make.believe
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Go home to your parents, you losers. Go back to your mommas' basements and play with your Lords Of Warcraft."

Writer/director **Frank Miller** tells the Occupy movement where to go



"Lucas is going to be the principal beneficiary of the success of *Star Wars* [*The Old Republic*]… I don't really understand how the economics work for EA."

Activision's **Bobby Kotick** wonders why no one's looking out for the publishing megacorp



"Ultima has drifted away from Richard Garriott, but I have not drifted away from *Ultima*. Over-used, irrelevant and re-used RPG elements are not the essence of my ultimate RPG."

We assume said RPG will be thirdperson as well, **Richard Garriott**

"We had to wait for this whole Greek debt thing to get resolved."

Tim Schafer explains why there's been a long European wait for *Trenched*, now known as *Iron Brigade*. That and Silvio Berlusconi, apparently

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Infinity Blade FX
Manufacturer Adrenaline Amusements

As the past few editions of Arcade Watch have shown, the Japanese arcade scene is just as much about iterating existing franchises and genres as the home console market. Montreal-based production house Adrenaline Amusements is taking a slightly different tack, however, porting smartphone games to the arcade.

Following the company's *Fruit Ninja FX* and *Flight Control FX*, Chair's *Infinity Blade* is the next game to make the leap to the big touchscreen. It's testament to Chair's technical prowess that the game looks good on a 46-inch display, from the characters and creatures to the subversively colourful medieval world. The gameplay itself remains largely unchanged: this is a linear hack'n'slash hybrid of twitch action and traditional RPG. It's the combat that makes *Infinity Blade* such a joy, and it's deserving of the extra space that's afforded by an arcade setup.

The multitouch screen is housed in Adrenaline's proprietary TFX1 cabinet, angling the display for more convenient swiping and tap-attacking. And best of all for arcade owners concerned by the prospect of fizzy drinks spilled by flailing teenage limbs, the screen is water resistant, too.



My favourite game DJ Shadow

The American turntablist reflects on growing up in the arcades – and being awful at the games he loved most

DJ Shadow became a household name on the strength of his debut studio album, Endtroducing. That was all the way back in 1996, but the record is still considered influential for being comprised almost entirely of samples from other works. Here, he reminisces about how being a regular at his local arcades made him the man he is today.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
I guess my earliest memory is stuff like *Battlezone* because I couldn't reach the little viewfinder. It was all vector-graphics stuff. It was mostly simple lines.

How old were you back then?
I was probably about six or seven, so '78 or '79, right about the time *Tempest* and *Defender* came out – I was really into those really quick-paced games. All Williams games like *Robotron* and *Defender* seemed really hyper-kinetic. I remember only real gamers could be good at those kinds of games, whereas *Pac-Man* and games like that seemed too cute and slow for me. Although I gained respect for them later.

So you became a 'real' gamer, then?
Well, ironically, I was never all that good at *Defender* or *Robotron*, but I remember being in awe of those who were, watching their fingers move. I didn't end up playing them a lot, because when you're a kid you get your parents to give you a quarter or 50 cents, so you wanted to play whatever was going to stretch that the longest. I ended up playing *Moon Patrol*. It seemed really easy to master, to me. I was pretty good at *Donkey Kong Jr.*

SHADOW LIFE
DJ Shadow has released only four studio albums over the course of 15 years. Not because he's lazy, but because he's particular – and it takes time to beef up his record collection for source material. His latest LP, The Less You Know, The Better, dropped, as the young people like to say, back in September, and is filled with surprising tracks like the scorching, Top Gun-esque anthem Warning Call.



I was an obsessive arcade gamer from about '80 to early '85. Towards the tail-end of playing, to me, it was the second wave of great games: *Paperboy*, *Mappy* and *I, Robot*. [*I, Robot*] has a bit of notoriety for being a massive flop. It was an Atari game, named after the book, and it had these amazing, ahead-of-its-time graphics. It was really conceptual. I was the only one who seemed to care about the game, and nobody wanted to compete to play it. It was amazing. I was happy to play it. I was always going to get a good five minutes out of my quarter, and it was really good to me.

"There were a lot of games like Defender and Stargate which I could never, ever master"

Has no other arcade game caught your attention since then?
Smash TV was one of the last games I obsessively pumped money into. It was funny because I grew up with arcades looking a certain way, and I remember going to Japan and walking into an arcade and going, "I don't get it. There are only six games in this giant room, and they all cost $5 to play." It seemed like within a year of going to Japan, every arcade I go into is modelled after that. I don't understand why it evolved into that, or who asked it to be that way.

Did you feel like you'd rather be better at games you respected than brilliant at ones you didn't?
There were a lot of games like *Defender* and *Stargate* which I could never, ever master. I really respected people who were good at those games but for whatever reason I couldn't do it. There were games that were similar I was able to be good at – well, *Joust* isn't similar, but *nobody* was excellent at that.

We don't know too many people who are even half-decent at it.
Yeah, I just remember you get to level eight or nine and all the platforms would go away and it was just this free-for-all. That was another Williams game, and I liked the types of games that they developed, and their sound design was what was amazing to me. I think that's what drew me to them. I remember when *Super Punch-Out!!* came out, this older kid had all this attention because the game had been in a day and a half, and there was a line of people wanting to play and watching him, gathering around it. Somehow he was already better than everybody else. You know how there are those kids, when a game would come in and they've already mastered it somehow? He got knocked out and was angry, and I happened to be standing right behind him, so he shoved me to the ground. That's all normal arcade shit. But for boys at that time, it was a place where you learned how to behave, how to carry yourself, and stick up for yourself.

What's your all-time favourite game?
Tempest [left], which I actually own. To me, it was the ultimate game at the peak of my interest in arcade games. ■



DJ Shadow, otherwise known as Joshua Davis, draws on a record collection said to consist of 60,000 pieces of vinyl

Dirk Lindner

WEB SITE
48 pixeles
www.bit.ly/ucxZzW
The golden era of the pixel was a time of gender stereotyping. A time of petite princesses and macho moustachioed men. It will be either refreshing or disorienting, then, for you to discover the handiwork showcased on 48pixeles, a blog that remixes classic game characters both famous and obscure into same-sex relationships. It's as much a blog for remembering classic casts as challenging conventional gender typing, throwing up the likes of *Adventure Island* and *Goemon* as frequently as favourites from Mario's games and the *Pokémon* series. The simple cut-and-paste work, together with a hovering pixel heart expressing the affections of the characters, means that you may never look at the likes of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* in the same way again.





VIDEO
Super Mario World Camera Logic Review
www.bit.ly/dyg4OV
If you thought the good old games of yesteryear were simple, think again. Developer Shaun Inman's analysis of *Super Mario World*'s camera reveals a meticulous design system beneath the 16bit veneer. Inman – currently at work on an iOS title himself – is well equipped to break down how the framing of *Super Mario World* is crucial to the experience, from the number of pixels you're afforded left-to-right before the camera gives Mario chase to the amount of movement triggered by a sprint.

WEB GAME
Stealth Bastard
www.bit.ly/s2cNQB
Curve Studios' penchant for recycling classic games – most recently, and disappointingly, with *Mega Man* impersonator *Explodemon* – continues and excels with *Stealth Bastard*. Guiding your Tactical Espionage Arsehole across the gun-metal grey and murky green stages requires careful attention to your grim, militaristic 2D surroundings. The gameplay is a mixture of hiding in the shadows, avoiding robots and cameras, and hacking terminals that requires a combination of timed jumps and enemy pattern recognition. *Stealth Bastard* is a free game with premium content – from leaderboards to a surprisingly deep level editor – and transcends the gimmick of its parody aesthetic with a quality of content that's rare on major platforms, let alone in the land of the free.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A miscellany of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**236

GAMEGADGET
www.gamegadget.net
The makers of the GameGadget handheld have lofty ambitions, attempting to amass a huge archive of games from the 16bit era, and making them available for purchase via an iTunes-like software client. Following a tethered transfer, the DRM-protected games will be playable on a white-coloured device that looks like a Nintendo DS minus the clamshell lid. GameGadget creator Jason Cooper hopes that publishers will see the device as an opportunity to draw revenue from long out-of-print titles. The device is also being pitched to game developers as an open-source platform. It's priced at £100 (SRP) and is scheduled to launch in January.



continue

Christmas gaming
Skyrim snow and the jingle of Link's kitbag. Merry Christmas to you

The visor future
3D on your face. Virtual Boy, this is how it's done

Next-gen rumours
We could tell you more. But we'd get in trouble

Red shells
Red means stop

quit

January's drought
On its way, like that visiting uncle with the suspicious stains

Game names
Whore Of The Orient? One for Keith Vaz, this

Falls from grace
We mourn you once again, *Need For Speed*

Red shells
Red means strop

TWEETS

I'll give a toss what keith vaz thinks of games, when he gives a toss about spending £480 of taxpayer money on silk cushions for his house.
@Cliffski
Cliff Harris, Positech Games

So cold I have my jacket hood up. Now resemble Ezio, albeit on a screen with broken horizontal hold and player permanently AFK.
@EdStern
Ed Stern, Splash Damage

In *Skyrim*, I'm playing a naked pervert named Lester who strips his victims, shoots arrows in their butts, and only eats stolen fish.
@krispiotrowski
Kris Piotrowski, Capybara Games

I've just been notified that I might not be the only Arch-Mage of Winterhold around. This is most embarassing
@giordanobc
Giordano Contestabile, PopCap



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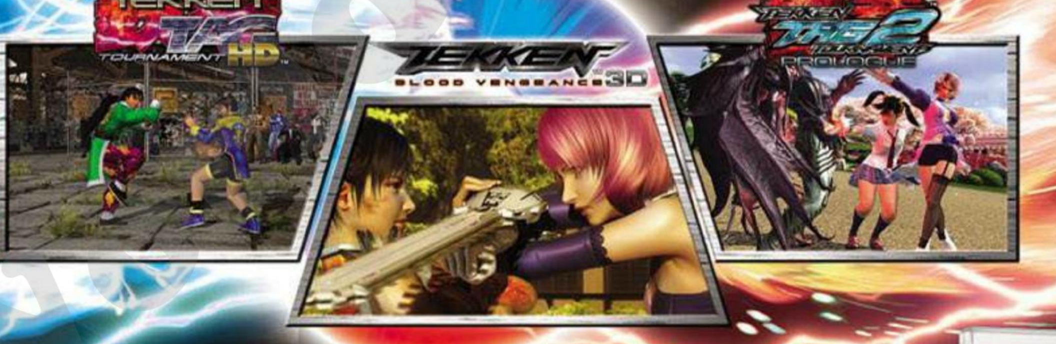


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SONY
make.believe

DISPATCHES JANUARY

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers take on the thorny matters of certain games' limited levels of interactivity, Tintin's attractiveness to women and the future of strong female characters in games, taking time to pay tribute to an industry founder along the way. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** is making some rather unusual new year's resolutions, **Leigh Alexander** wants game companies to stop paying so much attention to a vocal minority, while **Brian Howe** finds out the truth behind a much-anticipated videogame sequel.



www.next-gen.biz/forum
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 235

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Can I play?

About halfway through *Uncharted 3* I felt the need to ask a question of its designers. For several hours I had accompanied Drake as he climbed, tumbled and shot his way through exotic and exciting locales. My question went like this: "Er, can I have a go?"

"Shhhhh!" I seemed to hear them reply. "Don't interrupt our direct-to-video, Indiana Jones-inspired puppet movie!" After some pestering I was grudgingly allowed to push the stick around on the easy parts. Even then the designers insisted on telling me exactly what to do – and then kept snatching the controller back for the best bits. The big bullies! I'm hurt and disappointed, and don't want to play any more.

Scripted, assisted, prompted 'gameplay'. We've seen it before, but this is just absurd. Whereas many recent games are determined not to let you fail, *U3* is determined not to let you play. It's a game that doesn't want to be a game. But it's not a movie either. Should we then classify a new genre of electronic entertainment? 'Interactive marionettes'? 'Reduced-input dioramas'? 'Bait-and-switch'? What then is my role as the purchaser of this format? A user? A facilitator? A simpleton?

Or perhaps designers should look at their games-that-wanna-be-movies and ask the tough question: 'what is the challenge here for the player?' Because that's the role I want to play: a player. Please let me play!
Ciarán Kearney

Player autonomy has been an issue since Kojima blessed/cursed us with Solid Snake's first polygon adventure. If our hand's going to be held by anyone, however, we don't mind it being Naughty Dog – the studio can tell a ripper of a yarn, after all. And, as our next correspondent attests, linear spectacle can be the perfect gateway drug for a new audience, right?

Can she play?

After 15 years of girlfriend-present gaming, I've won one over. Not an easy convert either: no brotherly bonding games of *Mario* under her belt; not even any *FarmVille*. The game that did it is an adrenaline-filled rollercoaster ride that's "just like a movie!"

And therein lies the first problem. Controlling two thumbsticks at the same time is like patting your head and rubbing your tummy to a non-gamer. So she could only watch in awe, just as she had done with the new Tintin movie at the cinema.

When *Uncharted 3* was over she eagerly enquired what was next, and would she be able to play it? Racking my brains, I came up with nothing. All the games that ticked the cinematic spectacle box failed the camera control test. So I gave her the bad news and we went to buy *Modern Warfare 3* for myself.

At the till, however, a copy of *Tintin* was pushed into my reluctant hand. When we got home I discovered that it's not unbearably kid-centric and it has cinematic spectacle with no camera control expectations. Yes, with *Tintin*, all the barriers to entry have been dismantled. So what's the problem? I'm playing it when I should be playing *MW3*.
Ben Keegan

There's no shame in accessibility, and the power of the movie tie-in is still potent. The next step, surely, is to share some time in *LA Noire*'s interrogation room. She'll be playing without you in no time. Oh, and try to share the 3DS coming your way, too.

Can I watch you play?

I'm well aware that the FPS is the go-to game genre for both developers and consumers nowadays, but I don't understand why, as an industry that has come so far from its primitive origins, we still use the same terminology as we did 20 years ago. If I see a floating hand gripping a weapon in my line of sight, am I supposed to psychologically attribute said hand to me? Lightgun games notwithstanding (which can truly claim to be firstperson, as the only person whose eyes I view the action through are my own), shoot 'em ups are viewed in the second person: I know that I am in control of an avatar separate of myself, and while I may view the action through his eyes, for large stages, I am still an observer, not a participant, of the actions and situations taking place.

I have a proposal for an alternative label that could be applied to these games, although I doubt the manufacturers will be keen to adopt it, despite its aptness: POV. Much like other POV events one might witness on a computer screen (ahem), POV games are designed so that you, the observer, view the actions as they occur through the eyes of an observer who is physically in the environment as these actions take place, without actually putting you in the situation as it unfolds. The simulation of the event is irrelevant, given that the effect is the same: you know it's not you, but it's as close to being you as you're probably likely to get, and thus it creates entertainment. When you think about it, the only true firstperson game is *Championship Manager*, no?
Dan Robinson

An interesting point. We're over 40 years deep in the videogame industry now and it can be easy to slip into assumed knowledge and terminology that would cause outsiders to pop their monocles in confusion. As Tadgh Kelly highlights in his column this month, terminology is a weapon for mass discussion.

Can I play as her?

As a subscriber to **Edge** I have always enjoyed your features on games, particularly those

that take the time to understand and explore the impact of a game (the *GTAIII* feature in the most recent **Edge** is a great example). One comment in the recent issue caught my eye: "*Uncharted 3* may retain the female characters of the second game, but Naughty dog appears to have run out of things to do with them."

Women in videogames is a topic that has been often debated but not fully explored as far as I can see, and I would really value the thoughts of **Edge** and its readers on the impact and future of female videogame characters. For me, someone who purchased the first *Tomb Raider* on my PC, I have always wondered when female game characters would move beyond caricature.

Tomb Raider was actually a great example of an empowered heroine, albeit scantily clad and with some serious attributes. Her character, however, was anything but fleshed out. When I think about males in videogames, there are several epic stories that spring to mind whereby we have a leading man with genuine emotional development (*Red Dead Redemption*), internal confliction (Solid Snake) and even true emotions (*Mass Effect*). While Shepherd can be played as a woman, the point here is that it is almost perceived as a novelty, not the norm. Even male characters in some of the less-thoughtful games have story arcs and character backgrounds, but female characters with the same are the exception, not the rule.

Mass Effect and *Heavy Rain* (and *Catherine*, though I imagine that is meant to be slightly subversive) are two exceptions to this rule, but when I think of the number of actresses who are recognised for their leading roles in large-scale films, there appear to be many more than those who are believably realised in videogames. I wonder when we will get a videogame-defining performance on the scale of, say, Natalie Portman in Black Swan.

It would be genuinely interesting to see a fully developed epic game that not only had an excellently written female character, but also a complex love story, emotional weight and, most importantly, believable attributes (physical and mental).



Lara's all well and good, but Lee Madden calls for more female leads

When we will get a game-defining performance on the scale of, say, Natalie Portman in Black Swan?

One last thought: though I don't know the industry well, one assumption would be that both a cause and effect of this is that games have historically been a male-dominated industry, so perhaps the writers focus on what they know and publishers focus on the target audience. But if you look at HBO's Game Of Thrones, there is a broad mixture of genuinely interesting female characters – young and old – that add a wonderful blend of variety and realism to what could have been an old boys' tale of swords and sorcery (albeit indebted to the excellent source material).

Lee Madden

While mainstream gaming may be yet to truly deliver a definitive, landmark narrative with a female lead, women have played a crucial (if admittedly peripheral) role in games for years. The JRPG is a genre specifically aware of the importance of a female cast, and our look at *FFXIII-2* on p52 reveals a sequel not just in possession of, but pivoting around, two female leads.

A reason we play

As a person who can only be described as a techie and an all-round nerd, it was a source of great sadness to me when I heard of the passing of Steve Jobs. I found issue 234's tribute to the man very fitting. It was great that **Edge** acknowledged Steve's contribution to computing and the impact this had on the games industry. He was indeed a true visionary, and his legacy will live on for a very long time.

There was another sad loss to the computing industry one week later that I would like to share. I am indeed referring to the death of Dennis Ritchie, inventor of the C programming language and co-creator of the Unix operating system. Like Steve Jobs, Dennis indirectly contributed vast amounts to videogames. His language allowed easy code conversion between platforms, helping the spread of game software. Indeed, the C language is intertwined in the very DNA of every game we enjoy! Thank you, Steve and Dennis, for everything!

Andrew Dempsey

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our Web site at www.next-gen.biz and our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/edgeonline

Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

This is such a gorgeous game, so far I've caught salmon jumping up the waterfalls... they look amazing! Slaughtered some chickens so I can have some chicken breasts after my salmon. Got myself a companion who is too sexy for me to risk taking on missions, so I left her holding my gear.

I bought a horse, learned how to make it run fast, ran it up a mountain, fell off the side and killed us both! Had a walk around lots of places and met a giant... went to talk to him but he tried smashing me with something so I ran away.

daviedigi, Edge forum

I saw a giant's toe in a shop earlier, and I don't fancy chewing on one of those to see what effects it will have, it was manky.

Paul the sparky, Edge forum

For a beautiful and eerie sight, go to where they teach you about shouts, and you can roam about in the corridors of the fort. Looking down an incredibly long passage punctuated by misty shafts of sunlight from the imposing angular masonry, there was a cowled figure kneeling in one of the shafts far, far away (I kept thinking it was an object until I was closer, I couldn't believe it was so perfect). It was just every fantasy fiction moment arealised for me.

Lazy Gunn, Edge forum

I threw a dead dog in the river and off he floated with the current. I'm going to throw every body (not necessarily everybody) in there from now on and see if I can cause a huge morbid log jam.

Kow, Edge forum



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Resolutions for a final, glorious year of videogaming before the end of the world arrives

If the Mayans were right then the world will end in 2012, hastened (I hope) by the autumn publication of my new book on why our ridiculous cultural obsession with food, chefs and cooking is a sign of a decadent civilisation about to collapse. Imminent apocalypse also means, unfortunately, that we have less than a year's videogaming left, so we ought to make it count. In that spirit I have drawn up the following list of my New Year's Gaming Resolutions.

First, I resolve that I will stop frantically trying to melee NPCs to death while they are delivering interminable screeds of expository mono- or dialogue. One day a cunning game will actually let me kill a frail old scientist or annoying young rookie in the midst of telling me what we are supposed to do next, and then I won't know what to do next. My character will be trapped in a room with an unconvincing wooden door that is impermeable to anti-aircraft missiles, until he starves to death in another 200 hours of poignantly existential play-time. Of course this doesn't mean I'm going to start respecting NPCs as 'characters', but I ought to pay them slightly more respect as dodgily animated and excruciatingly slow-talking vehicles for go-there-and-find-that mission instructions which could instead be conveyed in seconds with a few lines of text – that is, if designers of superviolent laser-cowboy-gunporn videogames could count on all their customers being able to read.

Second, I will reinvigorate the retro game-reviewing vocabulary, since that will be the only way to distinguish oneself in an increasingly crowded media-critical space from the hordes of reviewers who are all now like Huizinga this and affordances that. I will write about 'graphics' and 'playability' and 'addictiveness', and even 'use of computer'. *Call Of Duty 23*, I shall prosily meditate, is a tragicomic Baudrillardian metadiscourse on the futility of a war that is not actually taking place while you are fighting it, with fascinating structural analogies to the latest findings of neuroeconomics; also, it has ashy graphics and uses the computer really hard.

> Call Of Duty 23 is a tragicomic Baudrillardian metadiscourse on a war that is not taking place

Third, I will campaign forcefully in favour of Quick-Time Events and the glorious freedom they bring – freedom for the designer, to show you whatever he wants regardless of your so-called 'input'. Building coherent explorable systems that produce emergent responses and behaviour is so 2008 and Clint Hocking, and frankly it's an insult to the post-2000s game designer, whose zombie-aliens-on-a-speeding-steam-train aesthetic vision is so inspired that no mere amateur (eg, the person actually playing the game) ought to be allowed any say in how it happens, or from which camera angle it's best to watch it.

In this respect I am inspired by the response of Naughty Dog to a review of *Uncharted 3* which literally set the Internet on fire with squeaky howls of fanboytard rage because it dared to award the game a mere eight points out of a possible ten, pointing out (in a dastardly simulacrum of reasonableness) that for much of the 'action', you are not actually in control. Naughty Dog bleated back: 'We have done even more than we did before to keep the player in control from moment to moment, and to return control to the player really promptly whenever we possibly could'. This reveals the wholly admirable fact that the default position for Naughty Dog is to keep the player the hell out of control during the virtual projection of its 'cinematic' story, and only grudgingly to 'return control' to the player during the minimal interludes when it is actually pretending to be a videogame so as not to fall foul of the Advertising Standards rules.

If my 2012 QTE campaign is successful, and the world for some reason does not end, perhaps because the Mayans were just dicking with our minds, then I hereby undertake to push the concept even further in subsequent years until my gaming nirvana is achieved, when all these nonsensical multi-stick or 'motion' controllers will be obsolete and the only thing you'll need to play a videogame will be a single giant button, labelled 'PAUSE'.

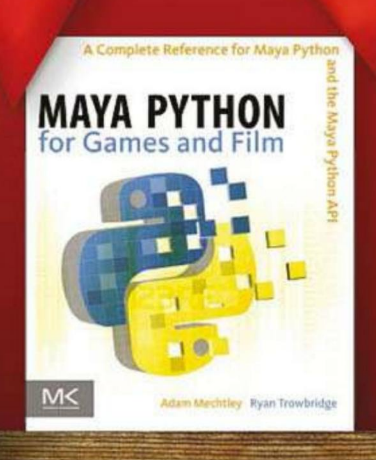
Finally, I will get on-message regarding the 'gamification' movement. I rather harshed on gamification's ludic mellow in 2011, devoting two columns here in **Edge** to explaining why gamification is moronic marketing-led cultural quackery that actually tramples the working poor underfoot while wearing a massive shit-eating grin on its sweaty face.

But now I understand the truth. There's no money in saying the emperor has no clothes. What there is money in is clambering aboard the latest glibly cyber-utopian bandwagon and cheering it on in PowerPoint presentations to corporate audiences in order to trouser enormous consulting fees. Therefore: gamification is awesome! And enquiries about speaking engagements should be directed at me via the contact form on my Web site. I promise to spend all my fees on booze and useless shiny geegaws before armageddon hits.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

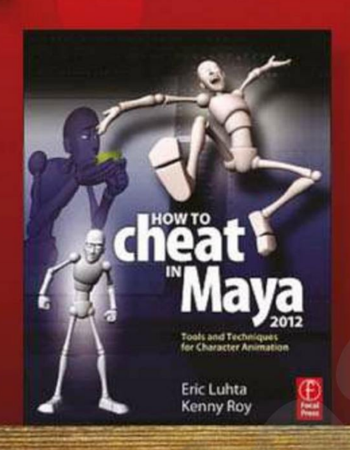
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WITH FOCAL THIS HOLIDAY SEASON



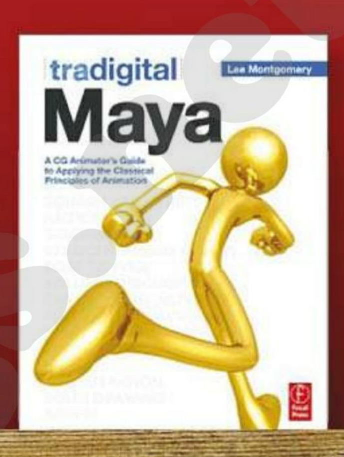
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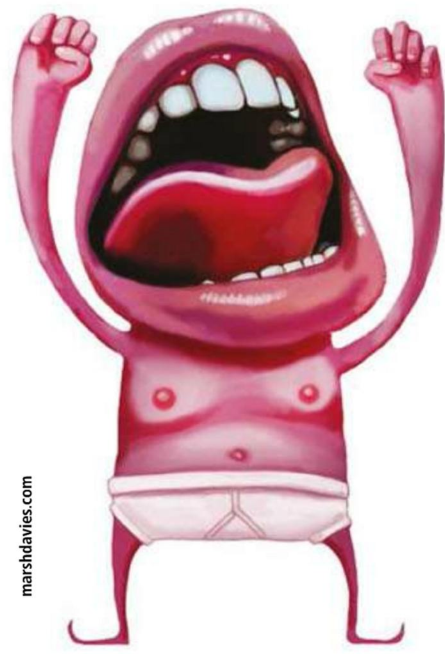
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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

It's time for videogame companies to stop fawning over the noise-making minority

There's a theory of customer service that suggests that the vocal minority is actually the userbase engaged and passionate enough to say what everyone else is thinking, and thus that outspoken percentage is the ideal bellwether for audience sentiment.

Part of the longstanding mistrust between many game developers and the consumer gaming press is rooted in the industry's suspicion that most reviewers have little more to qualify them than being among the most intense and vocal fans. Dan Cook of Spry Fox (*Triple Town*) is disdainful of videogame media, and he pointed to this same theory of the vocal minority when aiming to highlight the priority of long-term metrics over the immediate reaction that occurs online.

You can't really blame Cook or anyone else for perceiving the gaming press as fans who woke up one morning to find a microphone resting on their pillow. In a prior era, that was probably a relatively fair evaluation. And even today, the social media boom provides an opportunity for anyone to decide they're media. There are thousands of blogs and Twitter feeds from individuals who were passionate enough gamers to start Web sites and style themselves as reviewers.

Yet the fact that the vocal minority has the game industry by the throat really has little to do with the consumer press. Review scores haven't been shown to meaningfully predict or drive sales – the popularity of a franchise is primary. And although a sample of popular sentiment may forecast it somewhat, whether or not a franchise widens its fanbase doesn't have much to do with what people say about it online, either.

Look how the 'hardcore gamer' railed on his forum about the rise of casual games and accessible play – can you imagine what would have become of Nintendo, or of Facebook, or of Apple, if anyone had actually listened to him?

The games biz could benefit from some lessons already internalised by the traditional Web and social media sectors. Online community tools and services undergo frequent iteration, whether it's subtle visual tweaks (a hair's breadth in the logo typeface!) or more expansive UI overhauls. Facebook and Google in particular have made noticeable changes over the past year, the sort visible enough to cause a lot of notice and discussion from the sites' users.

> The cool-headed critic's analysis ought to be seen as a much better guide to the wider sentiment

Both services are popular enough, and the modifications visible enough, to cause quite a lot of reverberation across Twitter, personal sites and tech blogs. There were even the inevitable petitions from passionate users of those services who didn't like the changes. There were visible threats from long-term users declaring that this – this – was the final straw that would finally drive them away from this service and into the arms of a rival one.

And yet after a few weeks the chaos stabilised. In a few months people probably won't even recall what the services were like before. I hated Facebook's 'stalker timeline' and wished for a way to hide it, but now I'm used to it, and I can't deny it's increased my engagement with the site.

Any long-term online property will surely have periodic growing pains and fluctuations in user satisfaction as it strives to stay innovative and relevant. If it seemed like things had all gone high alert, it's because of that 'vocal minority'.

Unlike Google and Facebook, which quietly soldiered on toward the ends the data must have told them would be best in the long run despite the immediate online firestorm, our industry and our media are still beholden to the terror of the vocal minority. The traditional core gaming industry makes an almost-excessive show of 'giving the fans what they want'. "We're fans, too," scrapes any spokesperson for a popular franchise, sweating profusely as if afraid. This mentality is stunting the growth of the game medium.

As the front line of communication between the industry and its audience, the gaming press has the opportunity to break this cycle, and yet most outlets are so beholden to the vocal minority that they're afraid to specialise for fear of alienating anyone, afraid to break with the pack for fear of incurring mass ire, and afraid to find and prize individual voices for fear of being polarising. This fear is keeping us from evolving. Moderating the conversation in a way that manages, not obeys, the vocal minority will earn us the credibility we need to be effective.

The only professional reviewers to score *Uncharted 3* lower than a 9 – nay, to criticise the release universally anticipated to be perfect by core fans and armchair experts who'd only seen trailers – received death threats. In this case, the cool-headed critic's analysis ought to be seen as a much better guide to the wider sentiment than the vocal minority's, which flares up at launch and becomes more nuanced later. That's the role the gaming press should be playing, instead of being participants in the release-cycle marketing machine. The Web world knows that a balance of data analysis, calculated risk and the leadership of expert voices is key to the evolution of its services, and that the mob will disperse soon enough.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Lizard Osmosis developer HyperLoot talks about the changes it made to the RPG's divisive sequel

For the sequel to hit RPG *Lizard Osmosis*, developer HyperLoot made big changes to the first game's formula. Some might even call them shortcuts. While *Lizard Osmosis II* is performing well commercially, the franchise's fan community has expressed dissatisfaction with the shake-up. We talk to lead designer **John Laylow** about what went wrong.

One of the things fans liked best about *Lizard Osmosis* was the combat system. Why did you change it so drastically for *Lizard Osmosis II: The Dumbening*?
We gathered extensive consumer feedback from untraditional sectors after the success of the first game, and one of the things we kept hearing was that the combat was simply too hard. We knew the core fans liked it, but it was killing us in the Aboriginal market. We wanted *Lizard Osmosis II* to be rich and satisfying for hardcore gamers, but also simple to pick up and play after being parachuted deep into the Australian outback or Amazonian jungle. We think we nailed it.

But what would you say to old *LO* fans who find the new combat system boringly easy?
Frankly, they obviously haven't tried playing in Awkward mode, where every button input randomly remaps the controls, or Unfeasible mode, where the controller simply doesn't respond to any commands. That's why we baulk when people say *LOII* is too easy, because not even our playtesters have been able to beat the game on Unfeasible. We're releasing a difficulty-enhancing patch, too.

When will we be able to download it?
No, see, it's an actual eye-patch. You wear it while you play, which makes things considerably more difficult. It will retail for £15, or £25 for the Legendary Edition, a matched pair of patches – the ultimate challenge!

Another common complaint about *LOII* is the recycling of graphical assets. For example, the final dungeon, the Palace of Wonders, is just the Sewer of Wonders from the opening tutorial but reskinned with marble and carpet.
We funnelled a lot of the production budget into creating thousands of different fetch quests, not to mention the character creation toolkit. Our nostril physics are the most advanced ever. There was no way we could have designed enough original environments to showcase it all, so rather than deprive players of mushroom picking and nasal diversity, we chose to repurpose certain environmental assets, such as all of them. We find this design to be both edgy and classic.

But didn't you go too far? The final boss is exactly like the very first one, but bigger, red, and wearing a little Hitler moustache.
The little Hitler moustache was very bold of us. We spent a whole month individually rendering the specific evilness of each hair. But you're failing to mention that we also gave the final boss 9,999 hit points, which you have to chip off one at a time. How that's the same as fighting a small, blue, clean-shaven lizard you can knock over with a feather – a Level 3 Malefic Feather of Capsizing, to be specific – is beyond us.

Fans also complained that *LOII* was buggy.
That misconception comes from people not paying enough attention to the *Lizard Osmosis* fiction. You'll recall that at the very beginning of *LOII*, your character is compelled to gather mushrooms in the Forest of Pretty Big Rats for a local hausfrau. If you had bothered to click through the 72 menus leading to the correct page of the in-game encyclopedia, you would have learned that these mushrooms were psychedelic in nature, transmitting through skin contact. So any time your avatar falls halfway through the environment, stands on thin air, or seems to behold the very texture underneath reality, he is experiencing the effects of his exposure to hallucinogenic drugs. And to head off your next question, the game never, ever crashes – that's just your tripping avatar blacking out.

> "It didn't help our Metacritic score, but we got some great feedback from entomologists"

All of that was problematic, but we were talking about the game boxes being infested with weird insects.
We have already publicly acknowledged that somewhere along the line, about ten per cent of existing *LOII* game boxes became nesting grounds for a rare species of Amazonian stench beetle. It didn't help our Metacritic score, but we got some great feedback from entomologists. Plus, they're an excellent source of protein, and it's not like we charged extra for them. Why look a gift stench beetle in the mouthparts? We think a big part of the problem is complacency and nostalgia on the part of gamers. Since there were no stench beetles in *LOI*, they don't want to find them building their tiny malodorous dung canals inside the *LOII* box. We were not at all responsible for the insect infestation of *LOII* – the used market is probably to blame – unless you liked it, in which case we totally were and you're welcome.

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste

#236



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

As real as it gets

Videogames may be frequently centred on conflict, but never let it be said that they don't embrace a diverse range of tones within those constraints. On p66 of this issue you'll find *NeverDead*, a game that lets you reattach your severed limbs should they – heaven forbid – be torn off while you're fighting a demonic beast known as a Spoon. Turn to p56, however, and there's *I Am Alive*, a game that's already been scrapped and rebuilt when it was decided that its approach to a post-apocalyptic America needed to be a more realistic one.

I Am Alive doesn't let you reattach a limb by vaulting over the severed appendage. Letting you climb up the side of a crumbling building is about as fantastical as it gets. And even that's hard work: your stamina bar diminishes rapidly, and must be topped up with food and water. Just like in real life.

Well, not quite. This is the Realism Problem: the more a game aims towards grounded themes and naturalistic presentation, the more its mechanics jut out – binary, arbitrary systems bolted on to organic-seeming worlds. Clambering up the side of a ruined skyscraper is, we're sure, hard work. But the toll of hard work on the human body is only vaguely approximated by the sight of a depleting meter. And the instantaneous effect of water and food (dined upon in seconds via a menu selection) on the protagonist's stamina levels literally gives the game away.

Games can simulate machines – from firearms to jet fighters – with ease thanks to their own reliance on dials, metrics and rigid rules. It's why we're so often playing cyborgs. But if games are going to simulate the human body – with its inconsistency, vulnerability and organic response to stimuli – then they may well have to abandon the reliance on the robotic, quantifiable and easily communicated systems on which they're so often built.

MOST WANTED

Mobile Suit Gundam Unicorn PS3
FromSoftware trades fantasy hell for mech heaven as it returns to the franchise that prints money. With From's raised profile, perhaps the studio is the Trojan horse *Gundam* needs to make a gaming mark on PAL territories.

MGS HD Collection PS3, 360
A region-locked US 360 version makes the PAL release's schedule slip to February even harder to handle. The inclusions of the original *Metal Gear* and *Metal Gear 2* go part way to excusing the absence of the PlayStation's seminal, mould-making *Metal Gear Solid*.

Sumioni Vita
Tenchu and *What Did I Do To Deserve This My Lord?* developer Acquire makes its Vita debut with an ink-themed platform action game. Finger swipes create ink platforms and summon fiery death for enemies in a title that looks like the visual offspring of *Okami* and *Patapon*. Colour us excited.



ALAN WAKE'S

AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

The troubled author bites back as the series looks to Tarantino for inspiration

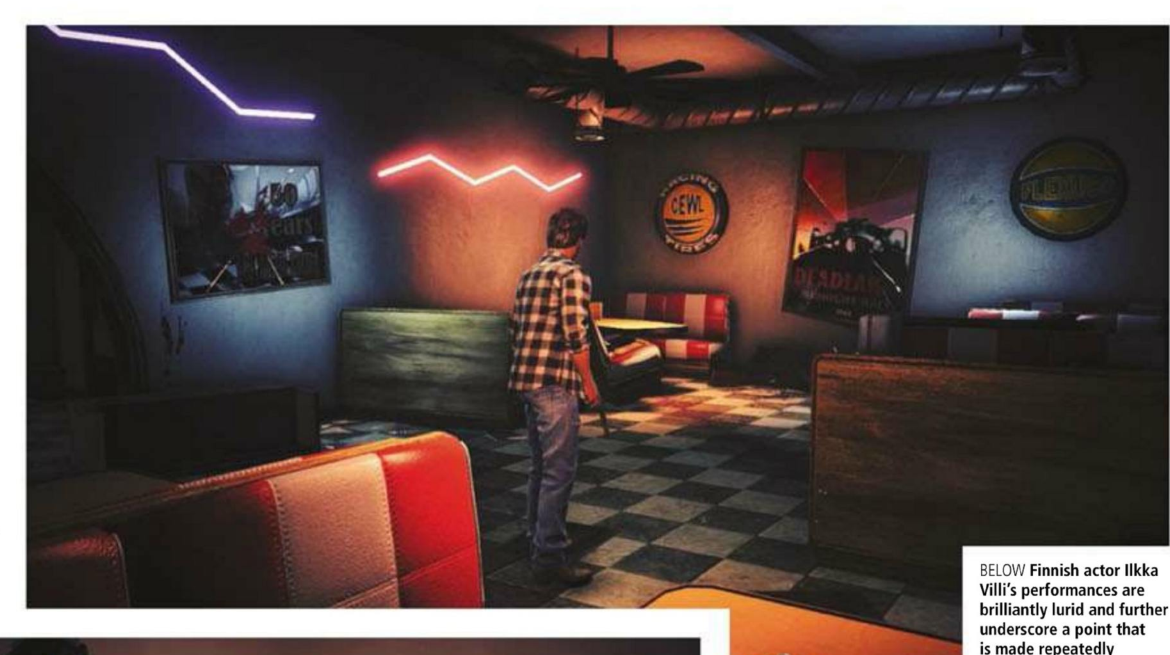
Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Remedy
Format	360
Origin	Finland
Release	Q1 2012



The game's title screen makes no bones about displaying its grindhouse inspirations, a fact Remedy hopes will make it clear that this is a standalone title



ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE



BELOW **Remedy has made an effort to inject more variety into the near-perpetual dark. As such, expect to see more dusky blues, dawn-break oranges and silver-streaked purples in the skyboxes**

BELOW **Finnish actor Ilkka Villi's performances are brilliantly lurid and further underscore a point that is made repeatedly during our visit: this is an opportunity for the team to cut loose and have fun**



Alan Wake's slogan could have been 'The pen is mightier than the sword'," Remedy writer **Sam Lake** tells us. "With *American Nightmare* it's definitely 'The *nailgun* is mightier than the sword'." Another metaphor we're offered is that if the first *Alan Wake* could be considered a riff on Stephen King, *American Nightmare* leans more towards Tarantino, with a healthy dash of From Dusk Till Dawn.

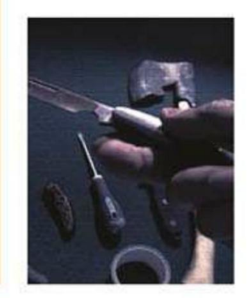
This grindhouse flavour was born of a skunkworks project that set out to experiment with, and expand upon, *Alan Wake*'s light-based combat mechanic, adding new weapons, enemies and even a leaderboard. The result is an arcade-style action mode evocatively dubbed Fight Till Dawn, more of which later. As this is Remedy, though, it wasn't long before a storyline crept in, so let's begin by establishing where *American Nightmare* fits into the *Wake* canon.

The end of the first game, and subsequent DLC chapters, left Wake trapped in a dark cabin beneath Cauldron Lake. Well, either that or his own psychosis. The truth, however, is of little concern to those left behind, and the rumour mill has been churning since his disappearance. Was he just a writer who went mad, locked himself up in a cabin and killed his wife? Or is there something else going on? In Alan Wake's world, where fiction can seemingly manifest itself in reality, this growing urban legend has given birth to Mr Scratch, a demented serial killer in Wake's image intent on finding Wake's wife, Alice, to do "horrible things to her".

Perhaps even more disturbingly, having escaped the darkness to hunt down his wife's would-be tormentor, Wake finds himself in the town of Night Springs, Arizona. Those who played the first game will recognise that name as the one shared by The Twilight Zone-inspired TV show for which Wake penned several episodes, and it isn't made clear whether this is now a real place, fiction come true, or some murky combination.

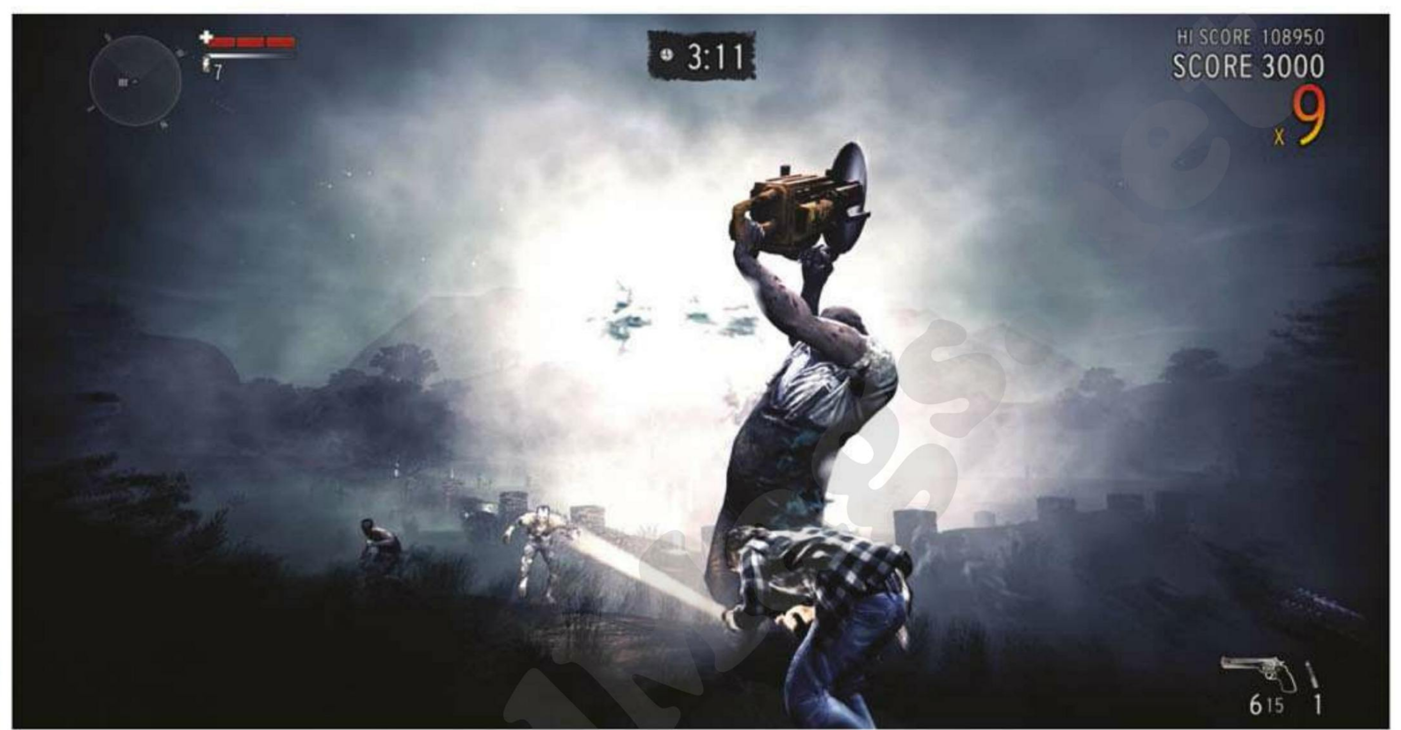
We start our playthrough at night facing Wake's former prison, Bird Leg Cabin, its distinctive twin portholes now askew as it sits upended amid debris in a new pool of water. Everything feels dryly familiar as we're reminded of how to shine a torch, fire a gun, and combine the two to first 'boost' and then kill enemies (the Taken) during a blink-and-you'll-miss-it tutorial.

Our growing fears that this is just another DLC episode but with elevated status are assuaged, however, when a path that leads down through the rocks from the cabin opens out into a wide open space, the distant light



Twin peeks

With Night Springs now 'real', it's left to Wake's dark double, Mr Scratch, to provide in-game broadcasts. His taunting messages are presented as live-action clips that feature a blackly comic, and suitably chilling, turn from Alan Wake model and actor Ilkka Villi as he kills victims on camera with all the gleeful resolve of Patrick Bateman. All of the main cutscenes are performed by the game's actors. The transitions between what used to be called FMV and in-engine sequences are handled elegantly and, despite the facial animation tech being overshadowed by that of games like *Uncharted 3* and *LA Noire*, it's difficult to see the joins.



This giant buzzsaw-wielding Taken is among a variety of new cast members that provide clear evidence of the game's shift to a more action-oriented focus. The greater variety of attack patterns and weaknesses makes for a far more engaging combat mechanic

from street lamps and a motel's neon sign offering a welcome beacon amid Arizona's dark, arid landscape. It looks wonderful, but more importantly demonstrates Remedy beginning to make better use of the open-world engine it created for the entirely linear *Alan Wake*.

Once safely in the reassuring light of the motel, surrounded on all sides by a menacing, dusky blackness, we find a woman working on a car in a garage – along with the aforementioned nailgun – who gives us a manuscript page.

"We really wanted to make *American Nightmare* a standalone experience so that people who have never played *Alan Wake* can pick it up and have fun," Lake explains. "But for the fans we have a huge amount of optional story content that takes *Alan Wake*'s story forward another step."

The first game used these collectable pages to increase the tension by foretelling upcoming events, but in *American Nightmare* a number form the core of a new mechanic in which you rewrite reality. The page describes conditions ("The wheel was turning", "Kasabian played on the stereo", etc) which if matched will shift the story in your favour. As Wake explains during a cutscene, "The line, no matter how outrageous, is now the truth."

Acquiring the items we need means venturing out from the cosseting safety of the motel into the darkness. A HUD radar makes locating the items easy enough, though once away from the light, the Taken soon begin hunting us down. Having to voluntarily acquire a Kasabian CD is made all the more traumatic when we encounter one of the game's new enemies: the Splitter.

"We have a huge amount of optional story content that takes Wake's story forward"

Slightly taller and stronger than other Taken, the Splitter lives up to its name by dividing into two to avoid the light when we instinctively boost it. Despite clearly



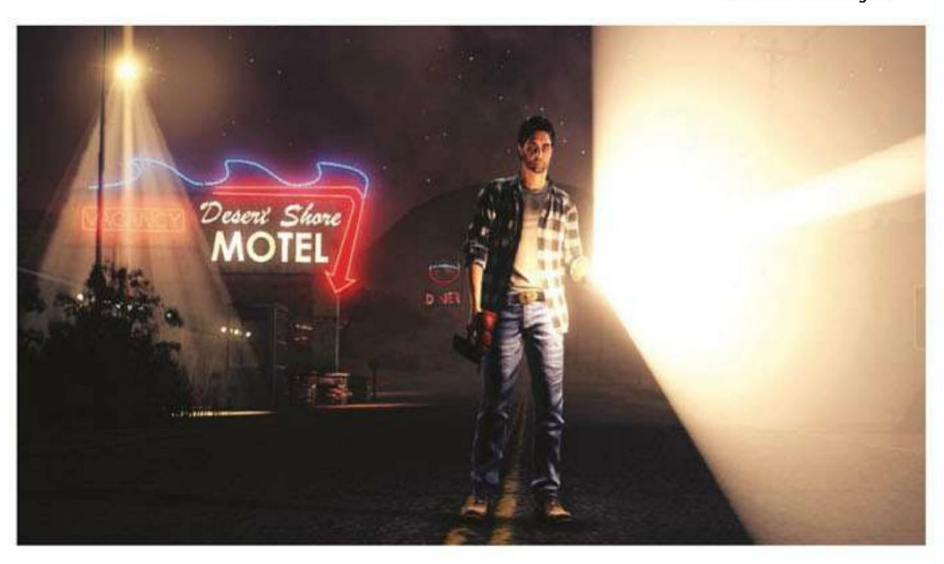
www.bit.ly/rOkJj7
Screenshot gallery





ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

The game opens with a shot of Barry Wheeler, Wake's friend and literary agent, in a motel. Surprisingly, he's now managing and on tour with Old Gods Of Asgard, the Anderson brothers' rock band from the first game



understanding the ramifications of this aggressor's ability, muscle memory sees us boost again, creating four enemies in the process. Running low on ammo and slightly panicked, we reach for our flare gun to quickly dissipate the group, realising too late our mistake as we're flanked by a small army of now weaker, but no less voracious, Splitters. It's a brilliant twist on the existing combat formula that adds a little additional strategy to proceedings: take on the stronger, but lone,

This is a mode all about adrenaline-fuelled machismo and reams of spent bullets

enemy, or divide it into weaker constituents and risk being overwhelmed?

It's this kind of decision that works so well in Fight Till Dawn, *American Nightmare's* (sadly singleplayer-only) Horde mode. Taking place in maps based on areas from the story mode, such as Cemetery and Trailer Park, you must survive against wave upon wave of enemies for ten minutes, after which dawn breaks and all remaining Taken are killed by the sunlight.

It's a rambunctious mode that showcases Remedy's 'wilder' approach to weapons and enemy design, throwing at the player Splitters, Grenadiers (which hurl grenades that explode with darkness) and a lumbering hulk armed with a chainsaw, and arming Wake with everything from Uzis to military-grade shotguns. A multiplier stacks up to a maximum of nine, gaining increments with every successful dodge and kill, while your final score will be uploaded to a leaderboard for XBLA bragging rights.

Aside from the lack of co-operative play, the only other letdown is the choice of soundtrack – a spooky ambient piece that, while atmospheric, saps momentum between waves. This is a mode all about adrenaline-fuelled feats of machismo, hair's breadth escapes and reams of spent bullet cases. It needs a soundtrack to match.

American Nightmare offers a reimagining of Alan Wake's world that's broadly similar to *Red Dead Redemption's* Undead Nightmare and *Infamous'* Festival Of Blood. If what we've seen so far is indicative of the rest of the game, though, Remedy's formula twist is built on far more substantial bones, and folds its changes into the gameworld with far more nuance. This doesn't mean it's in any less danger of alienating fans of Alan Wake's previous outings, of course, but it's a confident package which proves that Remedy, like Wake himself, is more than capable of writing its own future. ■

Q&A
Sam Lake
Writer, Remedy



***Alan Wake's* world, up until now, has been very focused. Were you worried about diluting the core fiction?**
Early on with *American Nightmare* we certainly talked about that a little bit. It is something that needs to be taken into account, and we felt that we needed a different stylisation. We wanted to create a spinoff experience that doesn't feel like the original *Alan Wake*. When you play the story, you can see there are certain elements that address this issue as well, and put it in the right place in the overall fiction. Obviously *Alan Wake* as a whole, as an IP, is very near and dear to us, and we want to take good care of it and make sure that we have a set direction. And we certainly wouldn't take it in an unexpected direction without making sure that everything is working as we wanted it to.

Did *AW* DLC pave the way for this game?
In a way it did. I feel that, for the fans, the storyline – which is in many ways optional content – will be the meat of it. It continues the *Alan Wake* story from where we left off.

Is it easier to keep your narrative focus with a shorter game?
I think it's more tied to what model and structure you are using for the story you are telling. A shorter experience by nature starts to get closer to a traditional movie story with a three-act structure. Back when we were making *Max Payne 1* and *2*, that was the model I was using. Obviously, that ends up being stretched quite thin at times, because the game is much longer. And already during *Max Payne 2* I was thinking, 'There's got to be a better way'. That was also the time I started watching full seasons of TV series by buying the DVD boxset. There are different things going on and different pacing in a TV series storyline than there is in a movie. For a longer game, the TV series is a natural match.

Some of the acting in the game is quite hammy – was this a deliberate choice?
We are very conscious of our sources of inspiration and have always been very open about where we draw those from. Looking at pop culture, there are so many cool things out there that are very rarely consciously taken and used as a source of inspiration in games. With *Max Payne* it was film noir, Hong Kong action movies and US action movies from the '80s and '90s; with *Alan Wake* it was obviously Stephen King and Twin Peaks and more literary sources. Here, it's very much the B-movie, Tarantino and grindhouse.

"*Alan Wake's American Nightmare* is a pulp action adventure," Lake says. "So this time around we are drawing inspiration from supernatural, sci-fi B-movie classics and urban legends. And having fun with it – a lot of fun! That was the mantra when we started talking about this project"















Design showcase

Remedy has let its imagination run wild as it blurs reality and fiction even more than before



ABOVE **Enemies, though unsettling, are darkly humorous, echoing the shift in tone of the dialogue.** RIGHT ***American Nightmare*** **is full of nods to Americana and the first game – the occasional Taken wears an Old Gods Of Asgard T-shirt.** BELOW **The ability to dodge – and shift into *Alan Wake*'s equivalent of bullet-time – takes on even greater value when taking on lumbering rednecks with power tools**

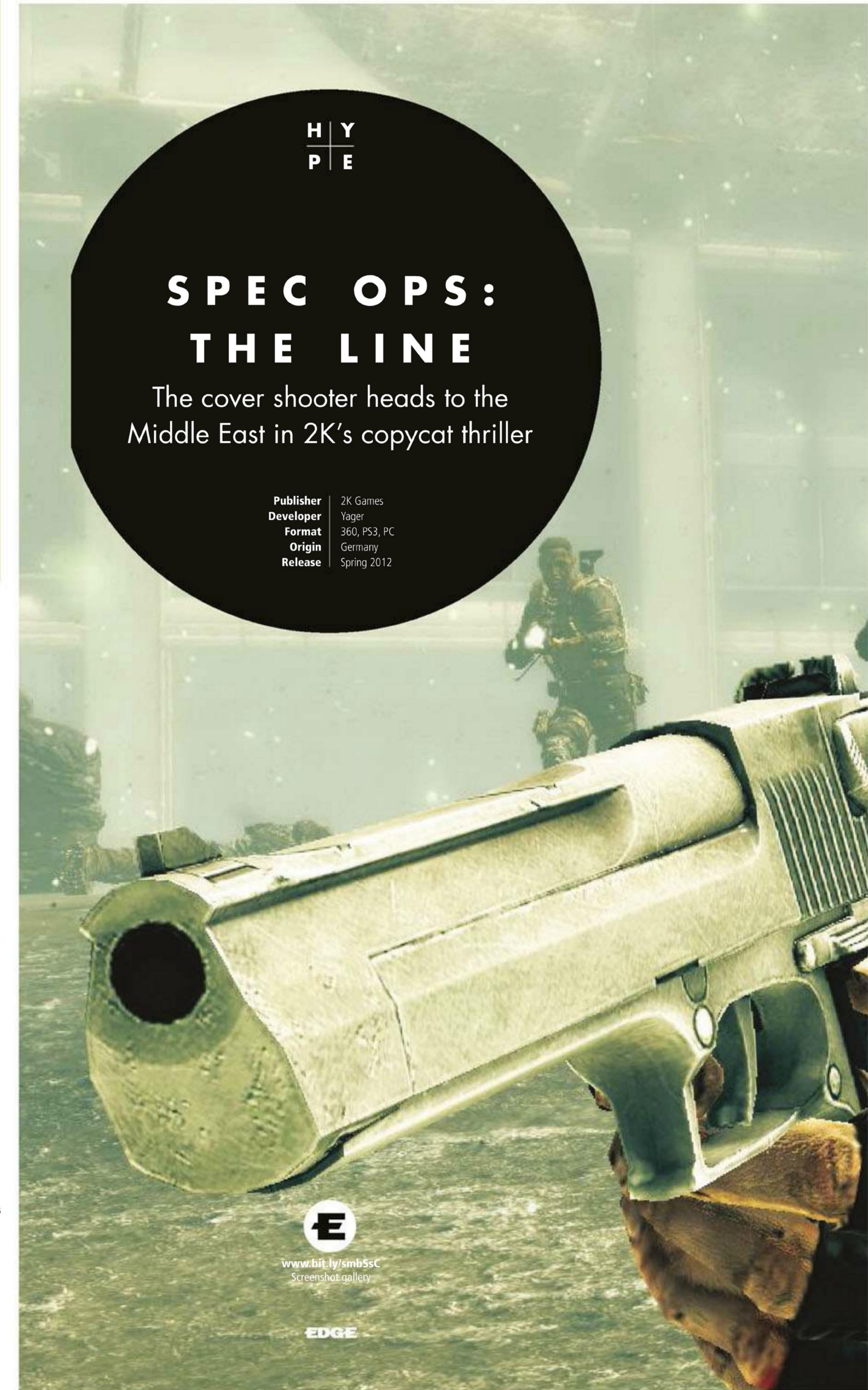
ABOVE + RIGHT **The entire experience, including the main game and live-action footage, is stylised to feel like an episode of Night Springs. Wake is, yet again, the author of his own nightmare. Mr Scratch was based on urban legends such as the Candy Man, invoked by a combination of curiosity and ignorance, and representative of an uncomfortable truth**







www.bit.ly/t7dKXN
More *Alan Wake* discussion with Remedy



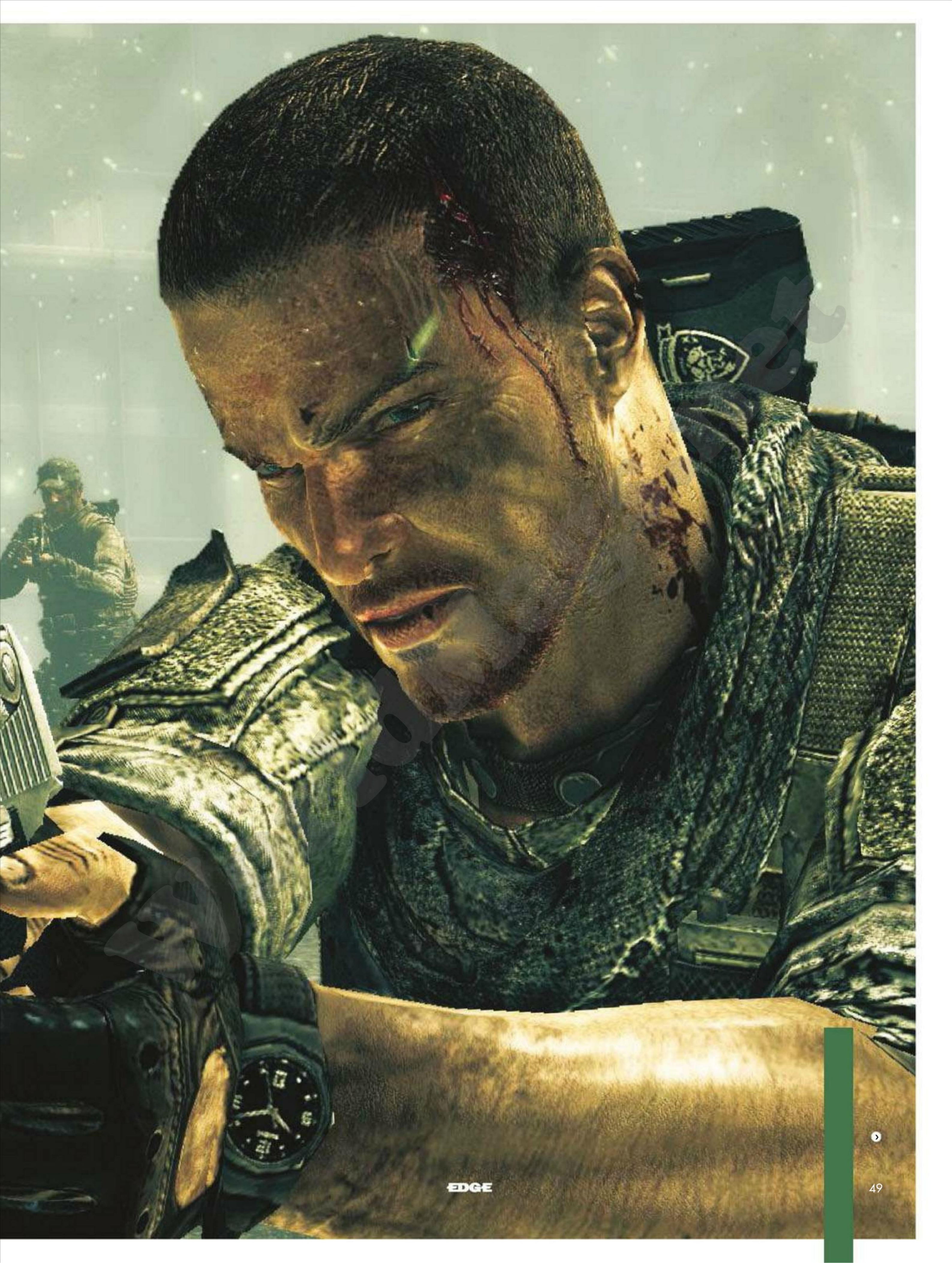
SPEC OPS: THE LINE

The cover shooter heads to the Middle East in 2K's copycat thriller

Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Yager
Format	360, PS3, PC
Origin	Germany
Release	Spring 2012

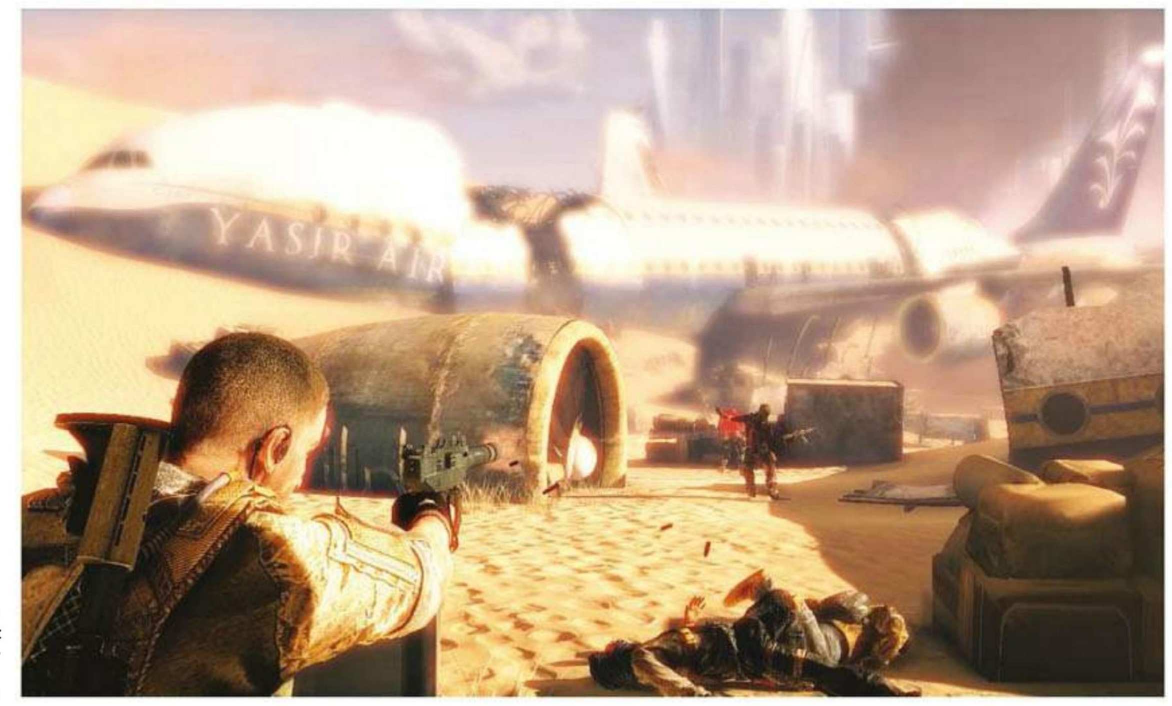
www.bit.ly/smb5sC
Screenshot gallery

Voiced by (who else?) Nolan North, the hero of 2K's cover shooter, Capt Walker, is on a mission to the heart of Dubai where a defecting, likely deranged, Colonel John Konrad is waiting





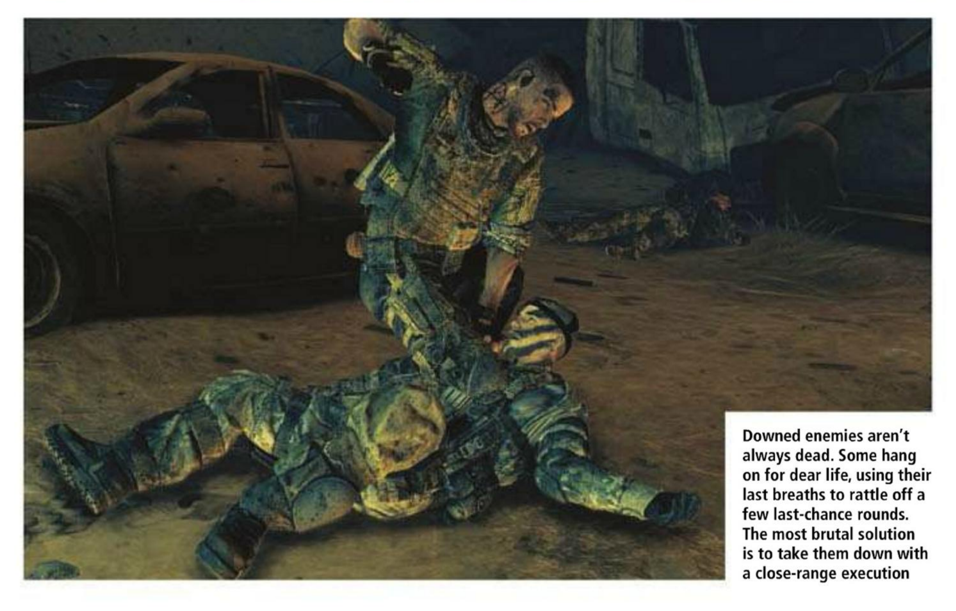
SPEC OPS: THE LINE



2K Games is pitching its cover-shooter tent between *Gears Of War* and the military shooter genre. It's a space not yet satisfactorily filled by big-budget attempts like Sony's recent *SOCOM: Special Forces*

Good designers borrow, great designers borrow a lot. That would seem to be the philosophy behind *Spec Ops: The Line*'s four-plus years in development. Though its namesake is a 13-year-old franchise, we're assured by producer Denby Grace that this is a fully fledged relaunch of the brand (see interview, facing page).

As our lengthy hands-on time with the game reveals, he isn't kidding. After a trailer that outlines the game's main theme (where do you draw the line in a conflict?), we're thrown into the game's in medias res opener: a heli-gun firefight over a ravaged contemporary Dubai. The vertiginous views of the city show off developer Yager's skill with Unreal Engine 3, delivering meticulous detail and extravagant scale. As cranes collapse and glass panes sprinkle like confetti under the beating sun, it's easy to forget you're a soldier



Downed enemies aren't always dead. Some hang on for dear life, using their last breaths to rattle off a few last-chance rounds. The most brutal solution is to take them down with a close-range execution

The vertiginous views of the city show off Yager's skill with Unreal Engine 3

on a turret, not a virtual tourist. The exchange of fire bellows as particle effects bombard you, while your sluggish manoeuvring of the turret adds to the panic. Before fatigue – or eyestrain – can set in, a sandstorm blasts the scene, crashlanding you into the dunes surrounding the city.

Protagonist Captain Walker – voiced by the ever-reliable Nolan North – and his two fellow spec ops members Sgt Lugo and Lt Adams find themselves on a sand-covered highway leading into Dubai. Refreshingly, it's through their sharp exchanges of dialogue that the team's core objective is drip-fed to the player: you're here to locate the deranged MIA Colonel John Konrad. A nod to Joseph Conrad's classic novella Heart Of Darkness (loosely adapted for the screen as Apocalypse Now), the simple premise allows Yager to dive headfirst into the action, peeling back layers of character through in-game banter rather than lengthy cutscenes. As you make your way along the road, trading shots with a shadowy local militia, it's the cursory details that catch the eye. Charred bodies sat upright on a bus, abandoned military vehicles and feasting vultures all set a grim scene that's both believable and affecting.

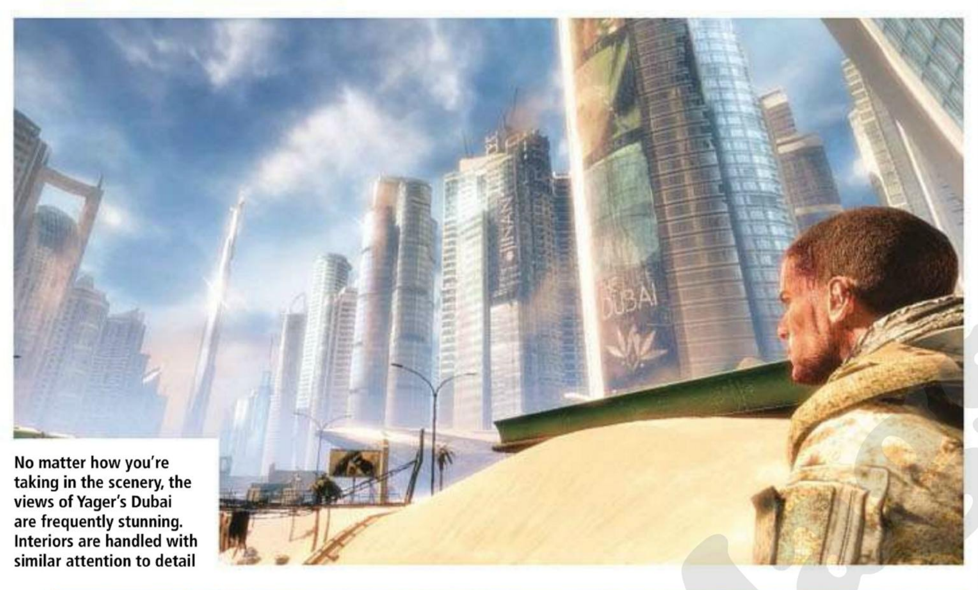
Movement along the linear route into town will be second nature to any *Gears Of War* regular. A press of A triggers a roadie-run; pressing it near cover pins you to it, and tapping B vaults you over it. Combat has a similar feel to the adventures of Marcus and Dom, too, with two primary weapon slots, blind-fire and melee attacks all pivotal to your survival. Cover is often destructible, and making use of the environment – by shooting out windows holding back deadly amounts of sand, for example – can give you the upper hand. Usefully and gruesomely, headshots initiate a few moments of slow motion that allow you some split-second dashes for cover.

The transition from exterior to interior environments is seamless, further reinforcing the technical ability of the studio, as you traipse through derelict, paper-strewn offices and scale the heights of the city's towering infernos. The setting may be contemporary, and the weapons and tactics may be informed by real-world militaries, but there's a distinct disaster-movie flavour to *The Line* that contradicts its attempts to moralise its



Building an army

Producer **Denby Grace** explains how 2K built up developer Yager to meet its high-end needs: "When we first started working with [Yager] they were 20, 30 guys. Slowly but surely we've built the team to 130. We've helped them find guys, and moved guys from [2K's] teams. We used our writers for the narrative. We helped them recruit from all over the world. The creative director [Francois Coulon] was previously creative lead on *Splinter Cell* at Ubisoft. And also our lead designer, Cory Davis, was a designer on *FEAR* and *Condemned* at Monolith. We've built this team slowly but surely over time."



No matter how you're taking in the scenery, the views of Yager's Dubai are frequently stunning. Interiors are handled with similar attention to detail



depiction of modern warfare. When you make contact by radio with Konrad – who it transpires is as deranged and tortured as a bald, burly Marlon Brando with jungle fever – the game introduces some interesting but rather shallow attempts to address your ethical 'line'. One scenario positions two hostages – both criminals in one way or another – in the line of Konrad's minions' sights. Who lives and dies is your call – or do you try to take down the snipers first? It's an intriguing, challenging situation, but the fact that it has no real bearing on the narrative arc, besides some sense of Walker's guilt, renders it bereft of real meaning and effect.

A section traversing the rooftops of Dubai's mega skyscrapers shows *The Line* at its best. Taking on the rogue, rival military at Konrad's command requires careful consideration. Lugo and Adams can be ordered to take out specific targets as you pick your own mark. Holding down the right bumper reveals hiding and nearby foes by their heat signatures, and releasing the bumper with your reticule hovering over a target sends your men running and gunning. It's a simple, useful tool that adds an extra layer of strategy with a minimal amount of input from the player.

Spec Ops: The Line offers a familiar set of mechanics transposed to a believable setting. It's aggressive, accomplished and has its sights set on the genre's mightiest heroes. If the multiplayer can offer a robust experience, and the singleplayer can deliver on its promise of a story worth investing in, *The Line* could make an impression in the sand where others – from *Conflict: Desert Storm* to *Army Of Two* and *SOCOM: Special Forces* – have barely made a mark. ■

Q&A

Denby Grace
Senior producer, 2K Games



Why is this the right time to bring back the *Spec Ops* name?
It was a brand 2K owns and it fits the type of game [we're making]. There's been a bit of an arms race [in the genre] recently with the number of weapons, multiplayer features, etc. The narrative experience has fallen by the wayside. When you look at our inspirations – Full Metal Jacket, Platoon, Apocalypse Now, Heart Of Darkness – these are great, great stories and there's definitely a place for that in games.

So it's removed entirely from the original *Spec Ops* games?
Absolutely. I am the only one who worked on previous *Spec Ops* games – as a tester. The publishing goal of those games back then was that it was a budget title on PS1 – the team size was like six or seven people. We're treating it like a completely new brand in our minds, a completely new franchise launch.

What makes Yager the right team for this?
They came to us with an Unreal-built thirdperson shooter concept. We had this IP we wanted to blow the dust off, and took it from there. [We] built the team around Unreal expertise. [We wanted to] just go and seek the right people.

Were there any reservations about including the likes of mass grave scenes in a blockbuster action game?
We were really conscious about it. The way we approached it is, if it's within the context of the narrative, not done to titillate or be gratuitous, we don't have a problem with it. We've been really careful in that respect – we've not put things in for shock value. We've always aimed to give it context within the narrative; we don't force the player to do anything super-uncomfortable outside the context of the narrative. It's more impactful when you do it that way. Just doing something to titillate, be gratuitous, you're going to get a laugh from a 17-year-old boy but you're not going to get much of the emotional reaction you want out of people.

The original *Spec Ops* games were left in the dust by the likes of Ubisoft's military-themed titles *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon*. How are you going to avoid that happening this time around?
One of the things we're doing on the gameplay side is we're quite action-based, fast. It's not heavily tactical, we make it light, without a lot of micro-management, which puts us closer to *Gears* and *Uncharted*. The narrative is the thing we think that'll really stand us apart.



Though there have been some clear side-steps in *FFXIII-2's* game design to more user-friendly systems, one thing that (fortunately) hasn't changed is the stunning art design of the characters and world

HYPE

FINAL FANTASY XIII-2

Will it be a lucky number 13 on the second roll?

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	February

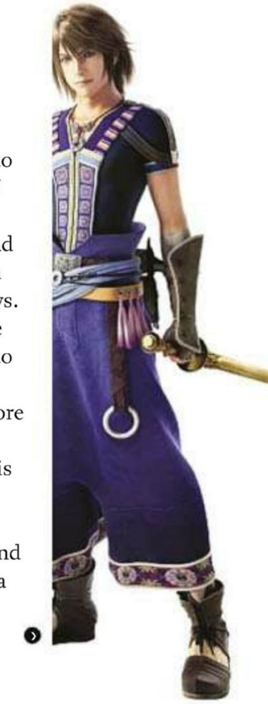


The Mog Clock allows you the choice to fight or flee the random enemies that rear their heads through even the quietest corridors. While such design decisions have been introduced to address the difficulty of *XIII*, they also open up a new entry point for newcomers

"The nature of the franchise is presenting something completely new each time," *Final Fantasy XIII-2* producer **Yoshinori Kitase** tells us. "I don't think there really is an established model we have to stick to." For fans raised on one of *Final Fantasy*'s main genetic strands, be it the NES/SNES-era games, the PS1-era revival kicked off by *FFVII*, or the PS2-era invigoration of *FFXII*, those be fightin' words. And while Kitase is keen to emphasise that this sequel is its own beast, it's difficult not to view it as a continuation of *FFXIII*'s polarising brand of super-linear JRPG.

"Because *XIII-2* is a sequel to *XIII* there is certainly an aspect of continuation about it, so we've listened to [fans'] opinions very carefully and taken them all on board, but rather than bringing *XIII-2* back close to what the franchise used to be, we just wanted to respect those opinions and try and rectify negative issues that many people agreed on," Kitase asserts. In our hands-on time with the game, however, the first new addition to the formula, rather than addressing the lack of autonomy that hampered much of *FFXIII*, actually reinforces the sense of linearity. The 'Cinematic Action Sequences' that pepper the opening scenes, as female protagonist Lightning dukes it out in some spectacularly choreographed and directed cutscenes, are quick-time button prompts that pop-up to keep your fingers and mind active. The intention is to add a sense of dynamism to proceedings, neutering the passivity of the series' extravagant, often prolonged, CGI sequences. "Before, what happened during a boss battle is that an event would play out in CGI and you couldn't get involved in it," Kitase observes, "but now in *XIII-2* you can type in certain commands and that is reflected visually on the screen, so it's another type of interaction for us." The problem is QTEs are such transparent novelties, whereas shorter, more succinct cutscenes would be a more immediate way to keep the pace cracking along. The second of the team's combat innovations is an added layer of strategy. "You can now collect around 150 types of monsters, and each comes with its own set of skills and abilities," Kitase says. "You can also make them stronger and more powerful, and choose which ones to take into battle for a very wide range of tactics."

Turning back time is one of *FFXIII-2*'s core themes, and while Kitase affirms this is no step back, you can't help feeling the studio is looking over its shoulder as it takes some narrative and technical leaps forward. After Lightning's epic battles on the beaches of, and in the skies above, Valhalla, the story takes a detour to sister Serah's beach abode, itself under attack. It's here that the game whiffs

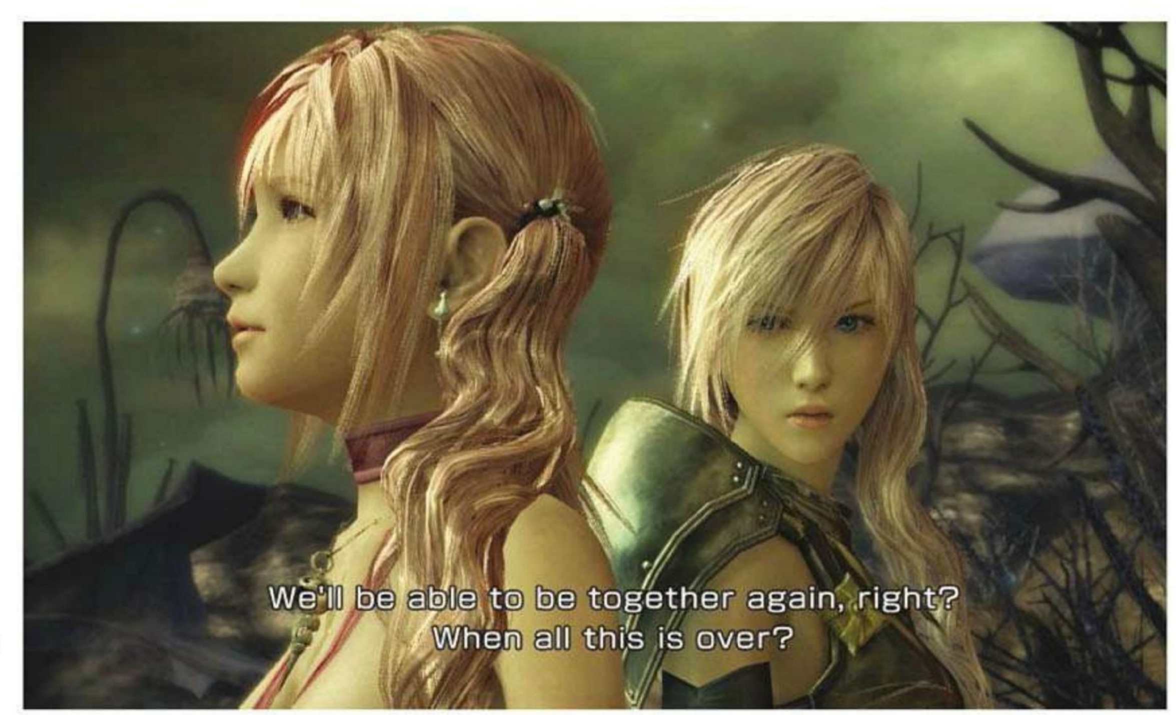




www.bit.ly/sDV5zY
More *FFXIII-2* discussion with Yoshinori Kitase



FINAL FANTASY XIII-2



RIGHT **The narrative is melodramatic and indulgent, but the introduction of the Live Trigger system and Cinematic Action Sequences at least bids to bring players more into the game's fold.** BELOW RIGHT **The often muted palette of *FFXIII-2*'s world is offset by the explosions of colour in its combat sections**



gloriously of a throwback to the hubs and miniature societies of earlier games. Once the initial wave of enemies have been vanquished, you're free to talk to NPCs and pick up nuggets of plot detail as you please.

The unravelling of *FFXIII-2*'s plot and exposition is also done via the new Live Trigger system. At certain points in your wanderings a menu of topics appears onscreen and your selection plunges Serah into a monologue of thoughts and feelings. Quite how Live Trigger choices affect the overall flow of the narrative remains to be seen, but it's a novel way of placing players inside the head of its characters and an admirable attempt to coerce you into relating more personally with the cast (another point of contention in *FFXIII*).

These tweaks to progression and the game's storytelling are where this sequel truly feels more open, more inviting and freeform than its predecessor. "I think many players of *XIII* found it too linear," Kitase admits. "I think a lot missed some more traditional *Final Fantasy* features, like minigames. And they would have liked to talk to NPCs more and receive subquests from them.

"The Historia Crux system is the new interface we've developed for *XIII-2*, which enables the player to enjoy time-travelling elements in the game. So from that interface you can choose a time location you want to explore and go there straight away, and also in each area of the world there are several of these time gates – so if you find a gate and unlock it you can jump to another aspect of that world. So by making different decisions in different worlds you can almost customise the story, and so enjoy a more individual experience in *XIII-2*."

Time also plays a role in random battles. A time-slowing mechanism kicks in on first sight of an enemy, offering you the chance to either flee or get the first strike in without plunging you into menu hell. It's immediate and useful, cutting out any sense of fatigue created by the traditional grind of randomised enemies and supporting Kitase's belief that this is a game you can play your way. Casinos and Chocobo racing are just a few of the minigames offered, and it's promised that NPCs throughout the land will offer quests.

Rather than the sequel its name suggests, *FFXIII-2* could be a meaningful reworking of its predecessor's rigid mould. An informed restart rather than a stubborn continuation, then, and hopefully salve for a wound from which many fans are still recovering. ■



Hard times

"One of the specific criticisms we received of *XIII* were that there were several bosses that were very powerful," Kitase explains. "The game was intended to be quite challenging – that was part of the design – but some gamers just couldn't beat these hard monsters and had to give up." The team's solution? To start off everyone in the sequel playing on normal difficulty. If the going gets too tough you have the option of switching – permanently or temporarily – to easy. It's further proof that the team is aggressively addressing the issues that plagued the previous game for many players.



BELOW **The opening battle on the beaches and in the skies of Valhalla is gorgeous, displaying a mass of detail as you segue between QTEs and cinematics. The absence of loading delays is a considerate touch**



RIGHT **If there was an award for 'most shots of characters gazing offscreen to the horizon', the *Final Fantasy* series would win every time. Though there are returning characters and themes, *FFXIII-2* is much more of a reinvention than a continuation of *XIII***



Q&A
Yoshinori Kitase
Producer, *Final Fantasy XIII-2*

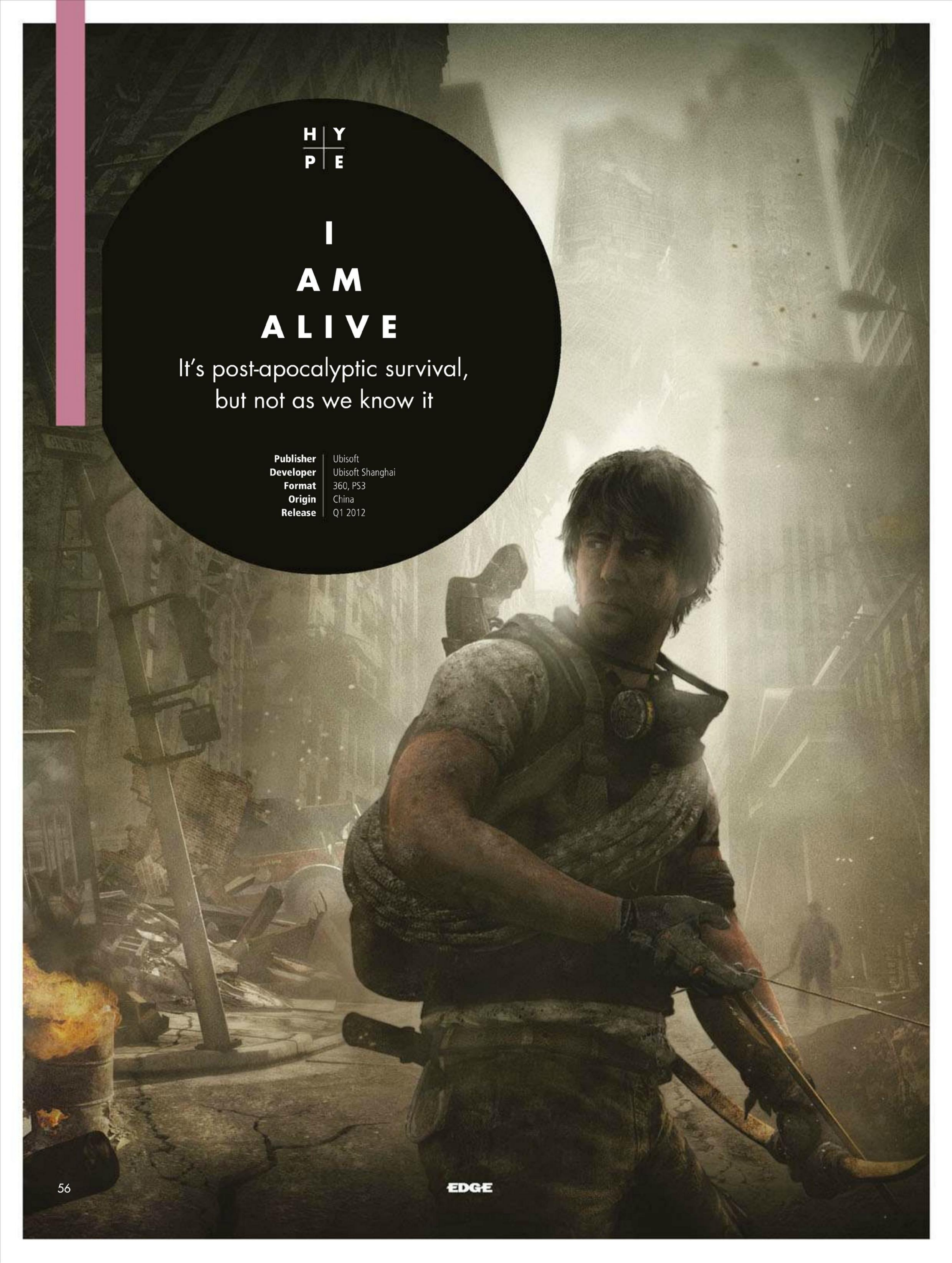


The QTEs are the kind of thing you'd expect in a *God Of War* or *Bayonetta* – is *Final Fantasy* moving towards that kind of thirdperson action in its combat?
In the global market we see many players moving away from games that used turn-based systems and towards what you might term an action RPG. That's a trend, and you ignore things like that at your peril. That said, *FFXIII* and *FFXIII-2*'s battle systems have those elements of speed and action that are the key words for us, though that doesn't necessarily mean we're going to stick to the same route in our next *Final Fantasy* project. That's something only time can tell.

Where does *Final Fantasy* fit in the RPG world, and how active an eye do you keep on the competition?
I'm not quite sure about calling those games our competitors – we don't actually look at them in such a way. Having said that, when we moved from *XIII* to *XIII-2* we definitely took inspiration from several contemporary games, though not necessarily RPGs. For example, *Red Dead Redemption* – we love the game, and play it a lot, and you can't help but be taken with its world. *Skyrim* is another game we have been following eagerly. We certainly enjoy playing other companies' games and learning from them, but we don't see them as something we're especially competing against.

In the early days of *FFXIII*'s development, the Fabula Nova Crystallis project was a big deal for Square Enix. What has *XIII*'s reception done to this suite of titles – are any cancelled or being re-developed?
Firstly, *Type 0* for PSP came out in Japan recently – it's been received quite well, we think. Then there's *Versus XIII*, which is currently in development. We released a trailer in January and since then there has been nothing, but I can assure you the team is working extremely hard on it and I think people will be excited when they next see it.

Was *FFXIII* a bigger hit in Japan than the west, or vice versa?
FFXIII has enjoyed commercial success of over 6.2 million units sold since its release. Over the three regions, Japan, Europe and America, it's actually more or less an even split across the three territories. When you look at big western titles they're often very successful in North America and Europe but not so much in Japan, and vice versa for big Japanese titles. So I think *Final Fantasy* is one of the very few big-name titles that are big in all three regions.



HYPE

I AM ALIVE

It's post-apocalyptic survival, but not as we know it

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Shanghai
Format	360, PS3
Origin	China
Release	Q1 2012

Encounters with hostile survivors are about bluffing, intimidation and prioritising the nastiest-looking target. Ideally, you can emerge from tight scrapes without wasting a single bullet

The extended development period of *I Am Alive* – it was originally announced in 2008 – is rather deceptive. "There was a game made in France," explains game director **Stanislas Mettra**. "We cancelled it. More and more over the last ten years, there's been a 'blockbusterisation' of games. It's very hard for a more original product to stand out."

Whatever concerns led to abandoning the first iteration of the game, it was digital distribution that saved the project. The current game in development at Ubisoft Shanghai, due for release on XBLA and PSN, is based on the same concept, but has otherwise been created from scratch.

It's easy to see why *IAA* might have sat oddly alongside more mainstream releases. It's built from two of the generation's more popular ingredients – a post-apocalyptic setting and a nimble, parkour-proficient lead – and it has plenty of attention-grabbing violence, too. But despite the similar themes, *IAA* differs in its execution. This is a game in which climbing up the side of a building looks like painstaking, agonising work. It takes place in a world where bullets are a genuinely precious resource, and where the mysterious 'Event' that led to global collapse hasn't spawned mutated creatures that must be slain in their hundreds, but has instead led to a muted bleakness that pervades every scene. It is, in Mettra's words, "realistic".

The opening cutscene sets up an appropriately modest goal for the game's protagonist: make it home. He was away on business when the cataclysm occurred, and we learn (by way of a video diary) that he's spent the past year travelling across the country. Now he's reached the city where his family used to reside. The city, however, is ruined. Roads and bridges have collapsed, and poisonous fog makes it impossible to cross most of its streets. In order to progress, then, he has to clamber across the devastation.

This is a game in which climbing a building looks like painstaking, agonising work

The climbing mechanic recalls *Shadow Of The Colossus*. A grip meter measures the amount of time players can climb before they must find a horizontal surface to rest, with trickier manoeuvres, such as jumps, leading to sharp drops in stamina. When the meter begins to run out, players must frantically bash a trigger to keep themselves from



www.bit.ly/uJE1iJ
Screenshot gallery



Rather than marketing hyperbole, Ubisoft Shanghai's claim to have fashioned a 'realistic' post-apocalyptic world has weight. There's a dirty, washed-out bleakness here, more reminiscent of The Road than *Fallout 3*



falling. This alone would be enough to differentiate *IAA*'s platforming from the effortless leaping of Ezio or Nathan Drake, but Ubisoft has ensured that it looks like hard work, too. Our protagonist both audibly and visibly strains to keep his grip, and cries out with the effort of pulling off what Drake would consider a laughably easy jump. These core mechanics are entwined with simple resource management: food and water can be used to restore stamina, while pitons can be driven into vertical surfaces at any point, from which the player can hang to rest.

The game's handling of weapons is similarly believable. Or at least the impact of using them is. Mettra skips to a later part of the game and the protagonist now has a young girl strapped to his back. Her relation to him isn't clear (she's Asian and he's not), but keeping her safe appears to have become a major concern. The pair are journeying through the subway system, and before long they stumble across a rowdy gang of survivors, who start threatening violence.

Notably, so long as you don't approach with a weapon drawn, a fight isn't always on the cards. The situation's definitely heading that way in this instance, though. The biggest, meanest-looking gang member moves over to the player and starts shoving him around. Meanwhile, two other thugs move to cut off the obvious routes of escape. While all this is happening, however, a button prompt labelled 'surprise kill' flashes on the screen.

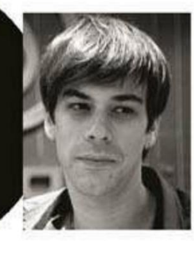
Suddenly, the player character pulls out a machete and guts the first ne'er-do-well before he can respond. Rather than simply triggering a battle, though, the sense of a tense standoff remains. The remaining two bullies keep a wary distance. By now, the player's drawn a gun on them, but one begins edging closer, claiming the pistol isn't loaded.

If you don't approach with a weapon drawn, a fight isn't always on the cards

He's soon proven wrong – a single shot to the abdomen leaves him writhing on the floor – and the last gang member backs down. For a fight scene, it was remarkably low key: protracted moments of tension punctuated by two brief flashes of violence.

It's also a scene that sums up the goals of *IAA*. Ubisoft Shanghai is taking the settings and mechanics that videogames have rendered cliché, and attempting to rehabilitate them through a more measured, believable treatment. It's a bold ambition, and one that might just ease our burgeoning sense of post-apocalyptic fatigue. ■

Q&A
Aurelian Palasse
Development and communication director, Ubisoft Shanghai

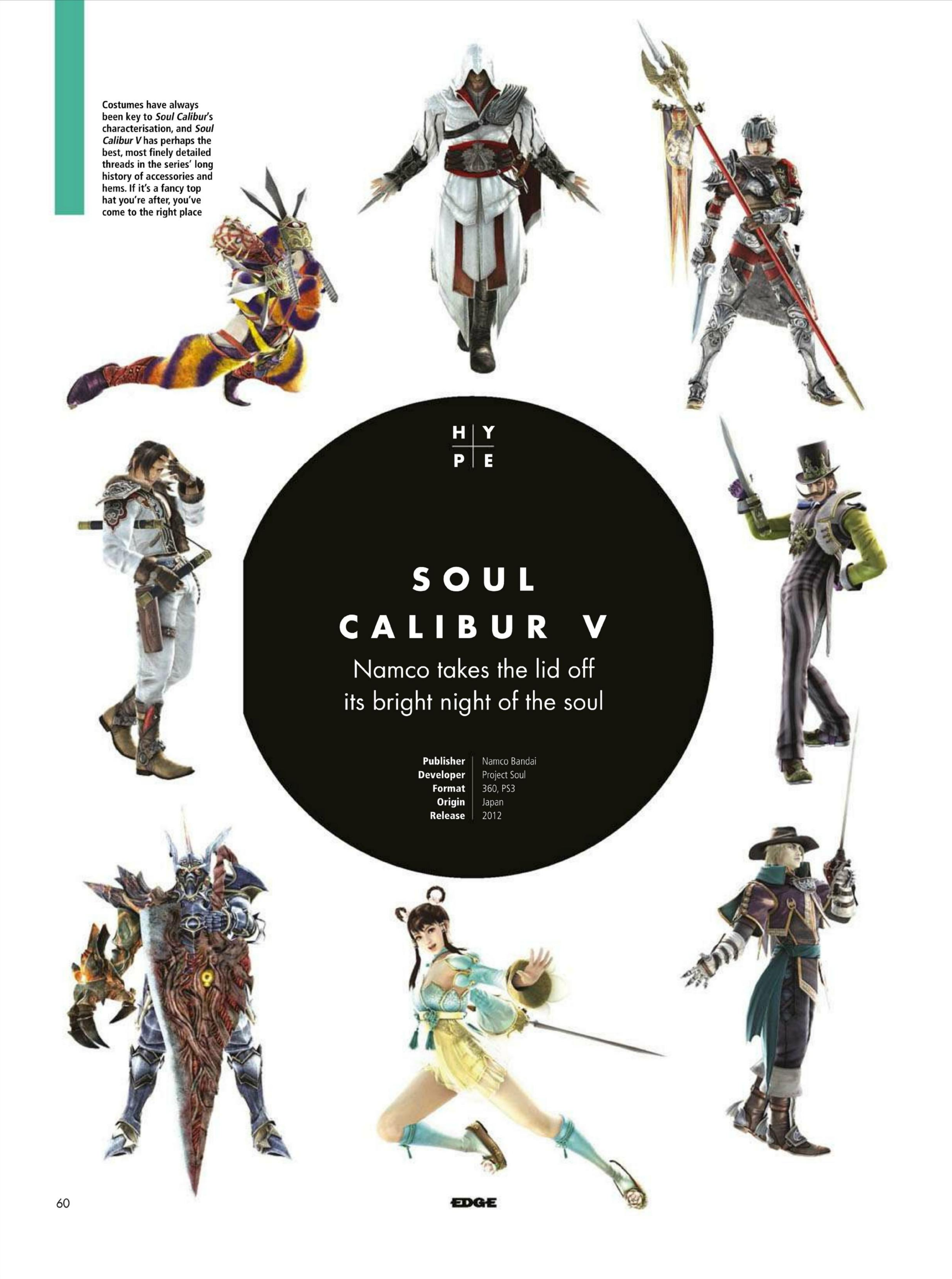


You've suggested that *I Am Alive* isn't best suited for retail release. What is it that you think will make it benefit from being a download-only title?
Well, it's a survival game, not an action title. You have to take care. You can die. If you run out of retries, you have to start from the beginning of a level, so you have to be careful and take [your] time with what you're doing. The bluffing system is something unique. You could only have one bullet, [and] three or four guys in front of you, and you have to carefully pick who you shoot, or bluff your way out of the situation. But what really makes it different is the atmosphere… A realistic post-disaster game doesn't exist. Most apocalyptic games have zombies, or that kind of stuff. But this kind of realistic atmosphere, I don't believe it's ever been done before. It makes for a different, a mature, game.

So you don't think it would perform as well if it was released as a boxed game?
I think it would have been hard for *I Am Alive*. But it's all linked to marketing push, advertising and so on, so that's a hard question to answer.

How much of the original game remains? And why did you overhaul the game to the extent that you have?
We started from scratch – but all of the initial pitch is [here]. It's post-apocalyptic, the hero is a normal-looking guy, there's still a lack of resources. We changed it because we wanted to make a more realistic game. Our *I Am Alive* is more dark, more mature. Before there was a stronger science-fiction aspect. We wanted to make it this way because there's already an *Assassin's Creed*, there are already easier games on the market. That's not what we wanted to do right now. We believed in the idea of this IP. If you remember the original CGI, it was still a post-disaster environment, but it was set immediately after the Event. We wanted to set it a year later to justify the lack of resources.

Xbox Live still has a 2GB file size limit. How much of a limiting factor is file size when it comes to making a downloadable title with high production values?
Well, because we started from scratch… we integrated that [into] our planning. We haven't had to reduce stuff, we've just had to create the game to make it fit. But you have to be careful if you want a lot of CG, and with textures. But for us, it's more art direction that's important. And if you look at the game – the colours, the dust, the atmosphere – that's what's important.



Costumes have always been key to *Soul Calibur*'s characterisation, and *Soul Calibur V* has perhaps the best, most finely detailed threads in the series' long history of accessories and hems. If it's a fancy top hat you're after, you've come to the right place

HYPE

SOUL CALIBUR V

Namco takes the lid off its bright night of the soul

Publisher	Namco Bandai
Developer	Project Soul
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	2012

Special attacks and grabs send characters into some gorgeously animated routines. Aerial moves, usually punctuated by a slam, receive a filmic touch from a restless camera

Our first impression of Project Soul's latest fighting game (see E232) was overpowered by déjà vu, but hands-on time with the majority of *Soul Calibur V*'s cast – against some fresh, luscious backdrops – reveals something much more pleasing than a retreading of old ground. This is a loud and proud homage to the team's heritage.

If you felt the addition of characters like Link and Yoda detracted from *Soul Calibur*'s core previously, you may want to look away now. *Soul Calibur V* carefully cranks up the eccentricity of each contender, creating an even more vibrant brawler built of cartoon violence, with a throwaway attitude to bright flashes and sparks of colour that edges it away from the middle-ground of the genre it once occupied. *Soul Calibur IV* was the perfect makeweight between *Virtua Fighter* (then still a major presence on home consoles) and stablemate *Tekken*. *Soul Calibur V*, with its extravagant finishers, dynamic camera moves and lavish looks, is now closer to *Street Fighter IV*'s bombast. Even the character select screen has a more distinct style, with characters now represented by striking manga-style artwork rather than their in-game models.

With the beat 'em up landscape changed by Capcom, it's not surprising to find Project Soul loosening up. The inclusion of Ezio Auditore as the token cross-franchise fighter is perhaps a further sign of the modern age, suggesting that exclusive IP has become a less potent weapon in console warfare.

Ezio is one of the highlights of a familiar but no less varied and well-balanced roster. Of the new characters, it's ZWEI and Viola who best personify Project Soul's more eccentric approach to its universe. Both characters have magic-themed attacks, with ZWEI making use of a floating lion, and Viola controlling a devastating orb that can zip around the environment for long-range hits. They're a perfect antidote to characters with super-sized weapons. The wildcards of the *Soul Calibur* pack, Voldo and Ivy, are still an acquired taste, but they feel less aesthetically out of place in this game's context. Though the roster has changed, much that fans adore remains: layers of clothes can still be smashed off, the power gauge remains crucial to gaining the advantage, and a ring-out is still a strategic option. The latter feature, though a staple of the *Soul Calibur* brand, is the one aspect that feels a little cheap in this current build, however. With certain stages set on narrow platforms, emphasising combat on a 2D plane, it can be all too easy to have a winning streak of attacks countered by a lucky flurry of side-steps and basic combos.

Another returning feature is the character creation mode. How much influence your story-mode accomplishments have on this element will be revealed in the final build, but at this stage there's a wealth of items and accessories to be applied to your combatant that can give versus play a personal and often



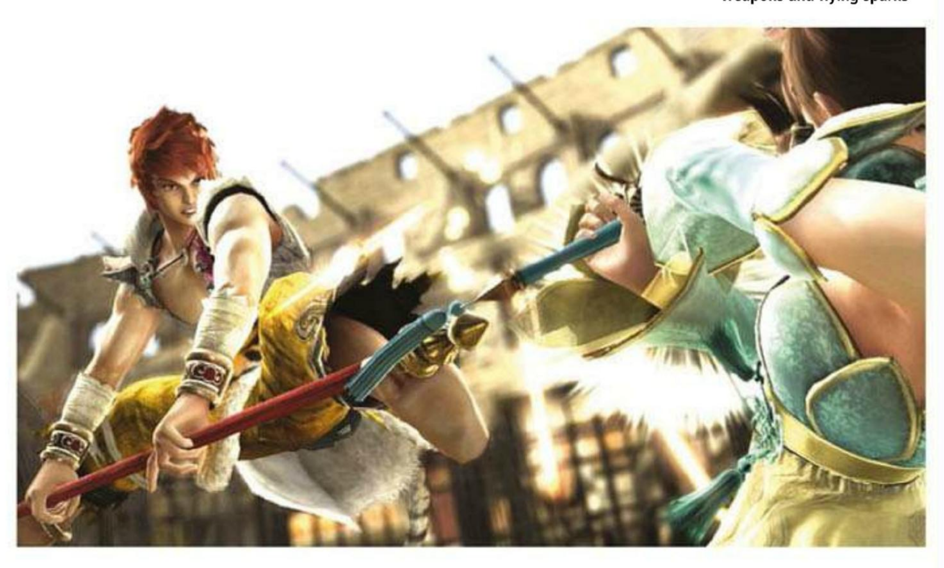
Soul man

Since the game was petitioned to life by fans on Facebook, it's no surprise to find *Soul Calibur V*'s team making use of the social network and Twitter themselves. Director Daishi Odashima has made particularly good use of Twitter since the game's announcement earlier this year, drumming up support for the title with a drip-feed of information on everything from characters to returning features. It's an engagement with the series' fanbase that, before the dawn of the truly connected world, was impossible, and it's a simple, obvious way of both securing preorders and keeping your audience directly informed.



SOUL CALIBUR V

The game's colour scheme – all mint greens and wine reds – is more muted than before, which actually emphasises the splashes of vibrant colour that accompany the tangling weapons and flying sparks



comedic touch. Players have the choice of modifying an existing character or starting with a blank slate, though wholly original creations require you to pick an existing character's move-set, of course. Building from the ground up is a novel time-sink, but with the depth of adjustable physical attributes it's a shame factors like muscle mass don't have a clearer bearing on your movement and momentum in-game.

The meeting of swords in *Soul Calibur*, though flashier and even more beautiful than ever, is largely as you remember it. Blocking by button-press gives the flow of combat a stop-start motion that may deter newcomers bred on the easy fluid counter-based motion of titles like *Dead Or Alive*, but once you hit *Soul Calibur*'s rhythm of grabs and stabs you'll remember why the brand has managed to survive to its fourth full sequel. To appease the storyline, set some 17 years after we last checked in, returning characters have been either replaced by younger models or given some signs of ageing. Natsu stands in for Taki, and Mitsurugi has chic grey highlights.

Soul Calibur V carries on the series' tradition of silly, overblown plotting that plays out like a swords-and-shields soap opera. Sophitia's son Patroklos and daughter Pyrrha are the leads of the game's narrative – Patroklos on a quest to uncover the truth of his mother's whereabouts (she's currently absent from the roster); Pyrrha on one of those journeys of self-discovery that involves smashing opponents to pieces. It's the serious, theatrical approach of *Soul Calibur*'s ridiculous pantomime that makes its clash of steel all the more enjoyable. With CyberConnect 2 producing the story mode, which we've yet to taste, the newfound verve to *Soul Calibur* could be taken to even greater heights (see *Asura's Wrath* for proof of that team's muscular, manga-influenced style).

Pyrrha is on a journey of self-discovery that involves smashing opponents to pieces

In previous iterations it's been the additional modes that have given legs to *Soul Calibur*'s staying power on home consoles. *Soul Calibur II* introduced Weapon Master Mode, an enlivening spin on the usually mundane progression of singleplayer action, *Soul Calibur III* gave us in-depth character creation, and *Soul Calibur IV* offered up online play and the critical finish system (also included in this latest iteration). While *Soul Calibur V* doesn't have anything as standout as such innovations, it seemingly offers a best-of for fans and a stopgap for players fatigued by the genre's 2D revival. ■

Q&A

Hisaharu Tago
Producer, Project Soul



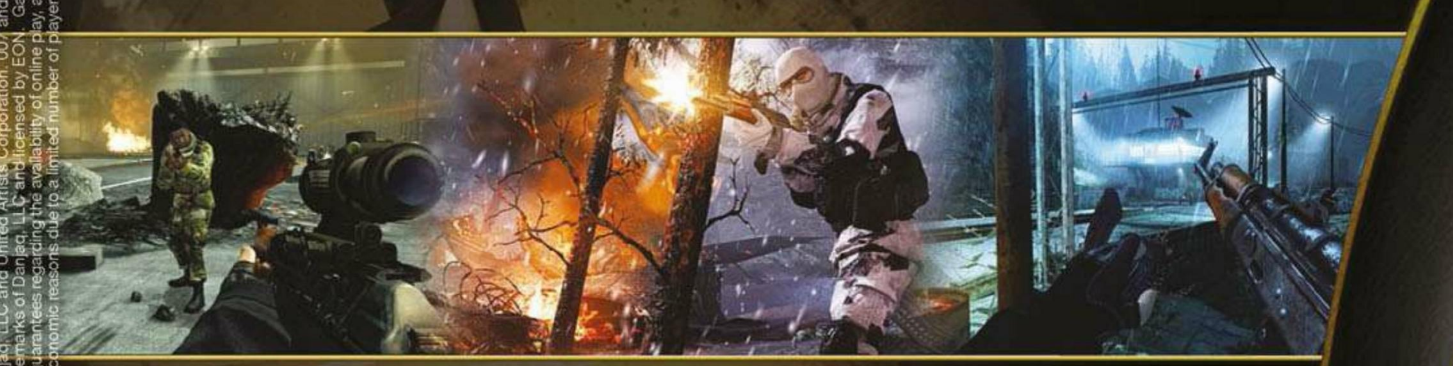
How did you end up settling on Ezio as the guest character for *Soul Calibur V*?
We were considering several candidates for the guest character, but one of the main goals for this project was to focus on the world setting. And when we sat down and thought about which outside character really fit the *Soul Calibur* environment, they thought that there was no other answer than Ezio.

What were the discussions like with Ubisoft to make it happen?
For *Soul Calibur IV*, Ubisoft was in charge of publishing that in Europe so we did have a very good relationship with them from the start. And we kind of went back to basics with them and approached them with that as the base. So it's not like we had to start from scratch.

How much freedom did Ubisoft allow you to put your own stamp on Ezio through his animations and move set in *SCV*?
Up until now, the guest characters we'd been using were from movies, but we knew that we wanted to use a game character this time around. As we're taking material from another game, it makes it much easier to port that character into our game. Because Ezio is a game character, we were able to reference a lot of the animations used in the games he actually appears in from their series. So I sat down with [animation director] Hiroki Minami and we looked at some of their animation in the Ubisoft games and thought, 'Hey, maybe we can use this bit as reference and maybe not this one so much'. So we started from there, but the actual animation was done by Minami-san, and he put that in the fine details.

The game's audio design adds hugely to the sense of character, giving a lot of weight to the constant clanging of swords. How was it tackled?
We actually changed the way we were developing the audio aspect of the game. Up until now, we were using mostly all internal staff for the music and the sound effects, but this time we were limited with the kind of staff that we could use internally. So we had to look to external partners to help develop the sound and the music. Up until now, we've tried to balance between the tastes of Japanese players and those abroad. But when we were working with this outside company to create the music this time we wanted to try to please the players abroad a little bit more since *Soul Calibur* is well known and well liked in the west.

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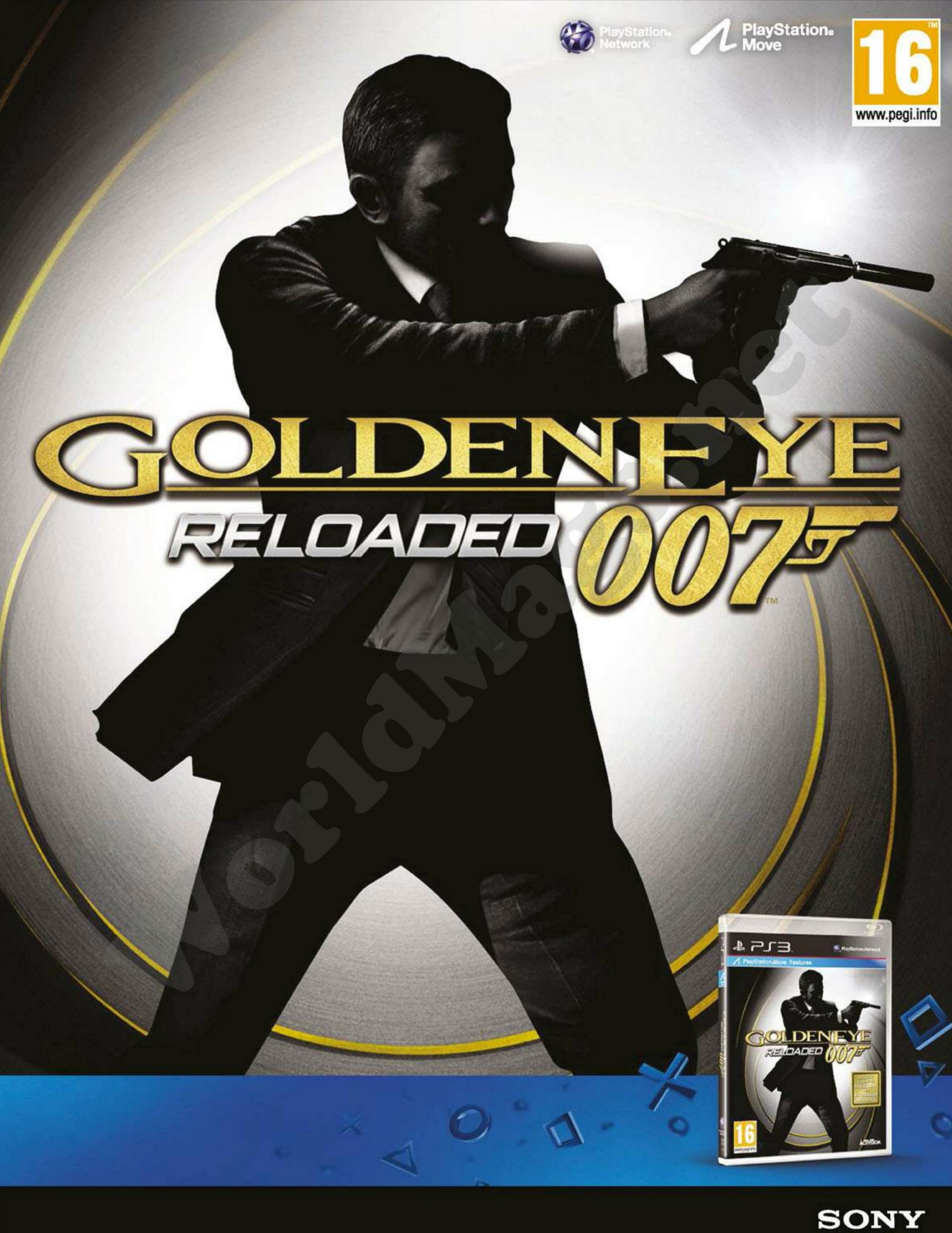
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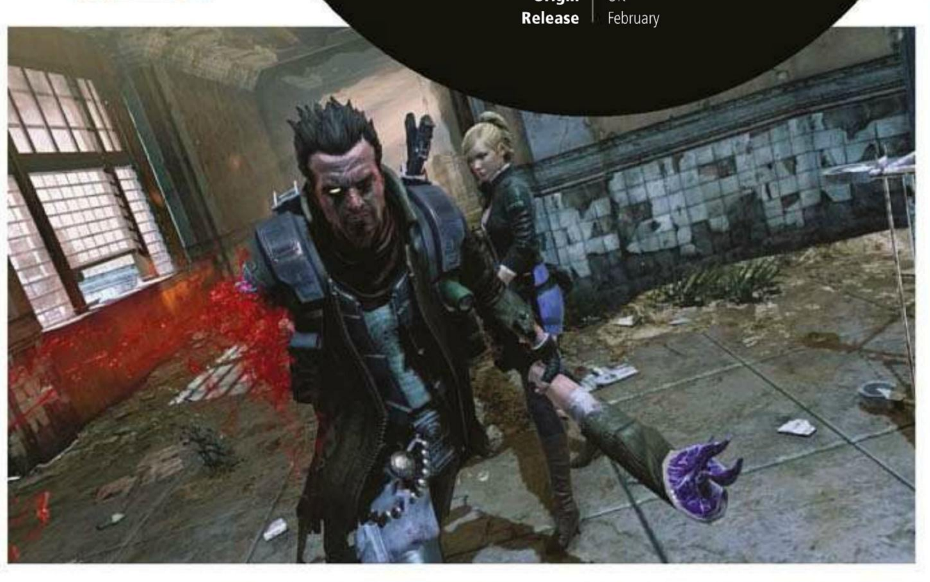




NEVERDEAD

A thirdperson action game with a twist: heads will roll

Publisher	Konami
Developer	Rebellion
Format	360, PS3
Origin	UK
Release	February



Things go boom a lot in *NeverDead*, and when the scenery begins to break – from lights to entire walls – it can all get a bit overwhelming

XP collected throughout the game grants access to a range of special abilities and upgrades. Most tantalising is the ability to make detached limbs explode like grenades





www.bit.ly/vFFJy3
Screenshot gallery

It can be a mad dash getting Boltzmann's head back on his shoulders. Of the many pickups, regeneration is the most sought after, allowing you to reassemble yourself in an instant

NeverDead's director, Shinta Nojiri, is no stranger to subverting the already subversive. His *Metal Gear Acid* games took Solid Snake's quirky, extravagant world of heroes and villains and stretched it over the frame of the antiquated card collection genre. With *NeverDead*, developed in partnership with Rebellion, Nojiri is at it again. A thirdperson demon-hunting adventure with enemies that look like cross-breeds of puppies and sharks, it's out there before you even get to the main, head-twisting mechanic.

Protagonist Bryce Boltzmann is a wise-cracking immortal, working with the National Anti-Demon Agency to vanquish evil and toss out one-liners. Boltzmann's immortality means when his mortal form is ripped apart he – and the player – lives on. Losing an arm merely means a single pistol at your disposal instead of two, and lost limbs can be reattached by rolling over them. Lose your legs in the jaws of one of the demonic beasts invading our realm and you'll be crawling but still firing. While you can maintain control of Boltzmann right down to his shuffling torso, it's when you lose your head that things get interesting. A decapitated Boltzmann puts you in control of his rolling cranium, allowing you access to vents and tunnels otherwise impossible to squeeze into. It's a clever concept, but in the preview build we get to grips with it's very much a predetermined gimmick. Certain points in the opening Asylum stage require Boltzmann to go headless to access and unlock new areas. Rather than achieve this at will, with a self-inflicted slice of your Butterfly Blade sword, for example, there are assigned points – open electrical fuseboxes – that cause his head to pop off. It's a slight denial of autonomy that will hopefully give way to a more freeform structure later on in the campaign.

Boltzmann may be immortal, but there are still game-ending threats to consider. Sidekick Arcadia needs to be protected and revived to ensure the successful clearing of a stage and if Boltzmann's head is swallowed up by a particular brand of hell-born nasty – the Grandbaby – it's game over. You also need to be mindful of the destructible environment: there are propane gas canisters littered all over the place, and walls, doors and electrified light fixtures can be used to your advantage if you shoot straight and keep your distance.

Combat is fast and simple, but far from slick. There's a particular lack of feedback from Boltzmann's dual-wielded firearms that jars with the lunacy and excess on show in the character designs. The option to upgrade weapons by collecting XP should compensate for this, but the protagonist feels clunky as he manoeuvres rigidly through the colourful, impressionistic environment. Drawing the Butterfly Blade is a more engaging piece of action, however. Holding L1 prepares Boltzmann to attack, and swiping the right stick delivers a slice. Blocking is performed in the same way, albeit with R1 held down, and it provides a tactical layer to battles sorely missing from the running and gunning.

NeverDead's tongue-in-cheek approach to its demonic theme keeps issues of polish in the background and its slapstick silliness in the foreground. There's a charm, wit and enthusiasm for destruction in the game that shouldn't be overlooked. Rebellion has a recent track record of delivering games trapped halfway between frivolous fun and disposable waste, but in Nojiri the studio has seemingly found a colloborator capable of steering the studio towards delivering something that dares to be different.





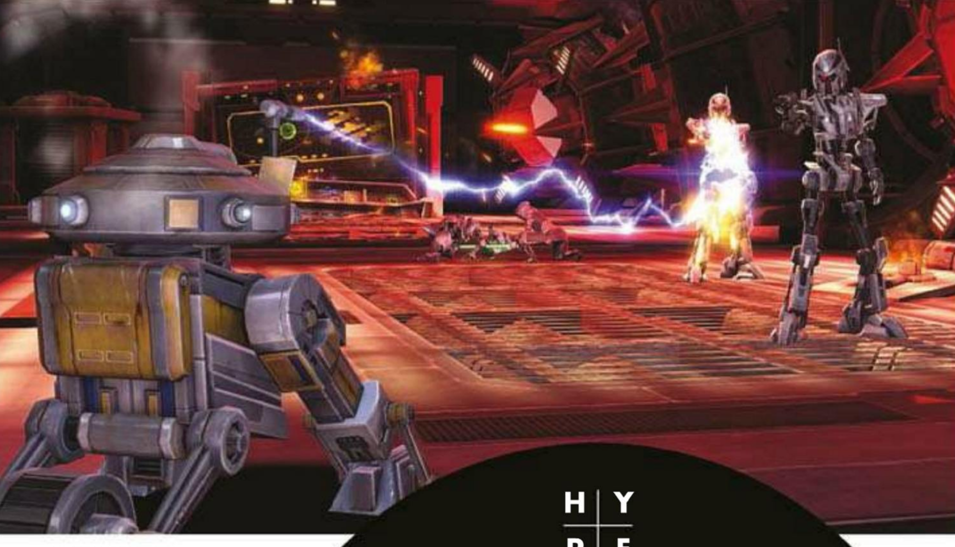
Metal heads

When the demon-slaying starts, the heavy-metal guitar riffs kick in right on cue. It's a suitably cheesy accompaniment to the limb-lopping mayhem and adds to *NeverDead*'s never-too-serious tone. With its quipping lead and occult subject matter there's a whiff of *Shadows Of The Damned* to *NeverDead*, and a parallel in the east/west crossover nature of both projects. Nojiri and his team are veering away from the crassness of Suda 51's trip to hell, however, and it feels more like a fusion of Ghostbusters and Mike Mignola's BPRD comic book. As other immortals enter the picture, the prospect of duelling heads isn't out of the question.



Jedi don't get to wield Lightsabers until level ten, but develop Force powers early. Consulars evolve their diplomatic skills by hurling rocks at enemies; Knights get a Force leap, and feel punchy in combat

Companions can be sent on missions such as offscreen diplomatic ventures to other worlds. Or you can ask them to root around in rubbish





The Miraluka are blind, but born Force sensitive. Their dark mirror image – the Sith pureblood – are similar, but born bright red and with a fringe of spikes around their faces

H Y P E

STAR WARS:

THE OLD REPUBLIC

BioWare spools up its galaxy-sized MMOG

Publisher	EA
Developer	BioWare
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	Out now



www.bit.ly/sB1oCr
Screenshot gallery

The Old Republic is no scrappy insurgency. BioWare hasn't strayed too far from the MMOG blueprints laid down by *WOW*'s conquering horde, and just as the battle between fantasy and sci-fi takes place under a niche banner of geekdom, *The Old Republic* is a would-be empire built in the same mechanical mould as its primary rival. To genre aliens, modern MMOGs occupy a branched path somewhere farther up gaming's evolutionary tree. BioWare has done little to challenge this perception in its new title: no matter your stance on fantasy or sci-fi as a preferred backdrop, *World Of Warcraft* and *The Old Republic* are markedly similar experiences. Both share systems, mechanics and overall sensation. This hardly represents a hyperspace leap for the MMORPG.

The biggest difference between the two is *The Old Republic*'s focus on story. Where traditionally MMOGs have gifted the player two screens of dry text prior to them tootling off into the wilderness to kill ten boars, BioWare has sprung for a grade-A voice actor to give the player stage directions. The result gives the game a pleasurable level of context, previously unseen in the genre.

Most of the game's eight classes – four on both the Republic and Sith sides – have a texture of their own. Most of these, by BioWare's own admission, are lifted from the movies. The smuggler channels Han Solo, imbuing him (or her, as all classes are voiced male and female) with a heightened sleaze the monogamous charmer lacked. The bounty hunter is the Sith's smuggler analogue, and the Fett to their Solo – all not-so-veiled threat and sadism. To BioWare's credit, it's done even better off the Skywalker Ranch: the imperial agent is more Bond than Boba, voiced with suave sophistication and handed a story that's more subtle and full of intrigue than his matinee peers.

It's less enjoyable inside the cloying robes of the Jedi. The setting – 3,000 years before A New Hope's battle of Yavin, at a time when the space wizards were still a recognised order – has rendered the Jedi monotheistic and inflexible. The decision to restrict Lightsaber access until level ten is ostensibly a good one, but as a Jedi knight, players are in danger of feeling mewling and defanged, running around the vaguely twee planet of Tython.

The Old Republic's morality system mirrors BioWare's other titles. In *TOR*, it's a binary meter, rewarding actions as either dark side or light. During the opening ten hours that constitute the game's first ten levels (of 50), the naughtiest the Jedi get is promising to keep some behind-the-space-bike-sheds kissing quiet for some furtive lovers. The Sith, on the other hand, have much more leeway with human decency. Sith warriors get to decide the fate of captives: players are exhorted to "let their passions be their guide", in a gleeful two fingers up to the pious Jedi.

> ***The naughtiest the Jedi get is promising to keep some kissing quiet for furtive lovers***

The game's 'class quests' are its story missions, and have a high hit-rate for quality and ingenuity. Being forced to make decisions, however black-and-white in outcome, is relatively novel for an MMOG. The beta period hasn't given enough time to tell, but BioWare promises the choices players make will affect them throughout their story. Your actions also influence companion characters' feelings. These are closer to traditional RPG pals than any MMOG alternative, providing conversation and crafting as well as a second pair of hands in which to entrust a blaster. The few available in the early portion of the game are written well, sometimes to the detriment of the game itself: the imperial agent – a long-range class whose skill bar opens up when moved into hard cover points – has another long-ranger as his first companion. She's a more engaging conversationalist as a result, but battles can infuriate as she fails to tank damage properly.

If the latter sentence makes no sense, *TOR* will be a harder sell. Combat remains stilted in direct comparison with an action game, and battle roles are reliant on the holy trinity of healer, damager and pain-absorbing tank. There's a pleasing freedom of choice in picking up these mantles: story comes first in *TOR*, so most classes can tank, damage or heal. For MMOGers comfortable with the idea of skill rotation and tapping out arcane number series to an internal beat, the game's abilities are at least visually interesting, if a little underwhelming. You might expect a sword made of light to cleave through soft flesh, but *TOR*'s Lightsabers act more like clubs, used for bashing enemies.

And players of all sides will be doing a lot of bashing. *The Old Republic* is characterised by its size, with 300 actors providing the English voiceover alone, and planets the size of *Dragon Age: Origins*. Each player gets a three-chapter story, making for hundreds of hours of potential play. But a tiring portion of that time is spent on traditional MMOG busywork: killing 20 space-boars, finding 15 space-boar hearts, then bringing them back to a man with a particular interest in space-boar anatomy. When so much of the game is grounded in healthy context, these trudging moments feel artificial and defuse the storyline's sense of grandeur.

Christmas will be the true test of the fledgling *TOR* empire. BioWare hasn't tried anything new to bring down the *WOW* Death Star. Instead, it has built a machine as slick and well-oiled as its opponents'. We'll find out who won the slugging match when the interstellar dust settles. ■



Friendly chat

Talking doesn't have to be a lonely pursuit in *TOR*. Join a group, and others can eavesdrop on your class quest conversations, spreading the story to an attentive, if inactive, audience. Flashpoints allow more input: four players hop into lengthy dungeons, interspersed with pockets of dialogue. Each player gets a dice roll, and the winner's sentence is spouted. Flashpoints constitute some of the game's most engaging dungeon runs, but are still marred by long stretches of combat. Early examples offer more story exposition; later level flashpoints are tough gauntlets, designed to be replayed at a variety of difficulty levels.

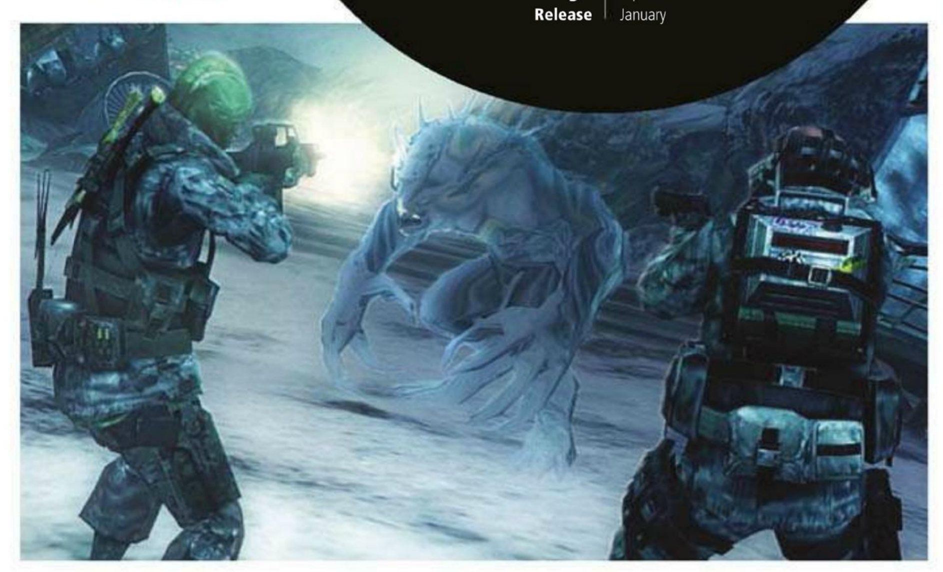




RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS

The survival horror staple gets both deeper and more shallow

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	In-house
Format	3DS
Origin	Japan
Release	January





As alien as this enemy's appearance may be, its most spine-chilling quality is actually its twitching, unpredictable movement

ABOVE **When *Revelations* introduces snow-capped stages, it sacrifices some of its distinctiveness, blurring together with titles such as *Lost Planet* and *Metal Gear Solid*.**
RIGHT **The visual clarity on display finally justifies Nintendo's claims about the hardware's capabilities**





www.bit.ly/rwDw5v
Screenshot gallery

Jill Valentine and Chris Redfield may be reunited, but don't expect to see them paired up from the start of the game. Jill now has a new partner named Parker watching her back

When you have a faceless albino mutant lurching unpredictably across a room towards your delicious-looking torso, every inch that separates you is meaningful. *Resident Evil: Revelations* – Capcom's somewhat sheepish retreat to the ammo-hoarding design principles that marked the series' early instalments – demonstrates a keen understanding of this fact and, by extension, of how to best leverage the 3DS hardware. Since the depth-accentuating effect can never prove essential to gameplay due to your ability to nullify it with a nudge of the 3D slider, the challenge for developers is to seduce you with its atmospheric possibilities.

As it turns out, *Revelations'* strain of survival horror combat is a perfect match for 3D. When you engage a foe, the left bumper causes your character to plant their feet and the perspective shifts to a firstperson view down the gun muzzle, a red laser guide stretching out into the air ahead of you. The scarcity of ammo in *Revelations* ensures that you'll wince each time a shot whizzes just wide of its intended target, which happens frequently due to the erratic movement patterns of each enemy type. The 3D effect merely amplifies your awareness of how much ground remains between your fixed location and each steadily encroaching threat.

Revelations employs an episodic structure similar to the one used in *Alan Wake*, each episode ending with a cliffhanger and the ensuing one beginning with a 'previously on *Resident Evil: Revelations'* recap of the previous instalment. Such faux-TV trappings served as a fun gimmick in *Alan Wake*, but feel more essential here. The bite-sized, short-burst nature of handheld gaming means that it's a bit easier to lose track of the plot, and you'll be relieved to get a periodic reminder of what's happening. Also, it's refreshing to see games shed their obsession with copying movies, even if it means simply copying prime-time television instead.

That plot? Well, it's as gloriously dopey and overcooked as you've come to expect from the *Resident Evil* franchise. Set between the events of *Resident Evil 4* and *5*, protagonists Jill Valentine and Chris Redfield are back in the picture, up against yet another bioterrorist faction. The game opens with Jill – who's apparently raided Lara Croft's closet for her tightest-fitting jumpsuit – arriving at a ghostly cruise ship in the Mediterranean after tracking the last-known coordinates of Chris and his partner, Jessica Sherawat, who've gone missing. Jill also has a new partner from the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance named Parker Luciani. As events progress, you'll switch between character viewpoints depending on whoever happens to be the star of a given episode.

Revelations is an absolutely gorgeous game, which will be a relief if you were starting to wonder whether all the talk of 3DS's processing power was merely hypothetical. As you press on down a hallway of the dark cruise ship, shattered windows let in sprays of ocean and ominous moonlight. Unfortunately, while everything looks great, early episodes feel slight in terms of the variety of each experience. You encounter only a single enemy type in the first episode – those faceless albino mutants – and while the second episode changes the landscape to a snowy mountaintop and ice cave, you'll be thwarted in your desire to kill anything that's not a feral wolf. If *Revelations* fails to broaden in scope as it goes on, it will simply reinforce the perception of handheld games as second-class experiences. ■

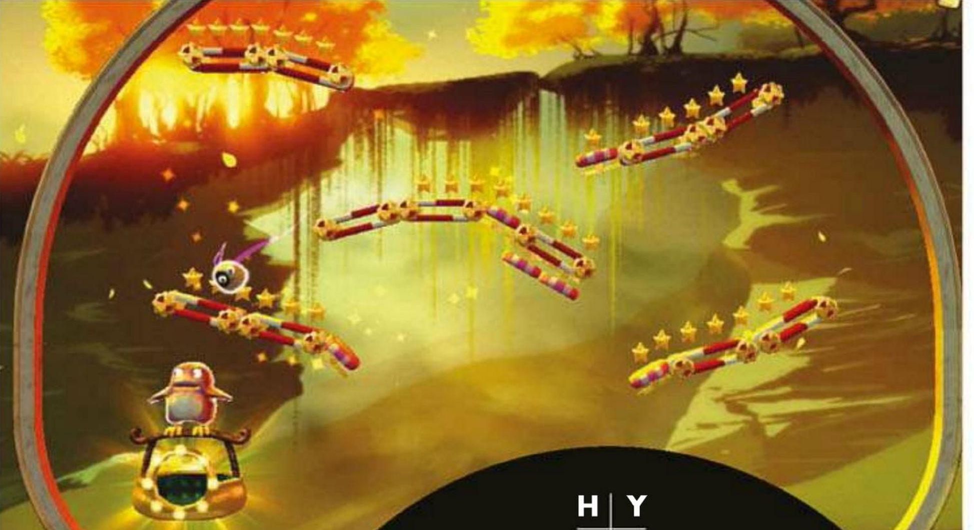


Scan the room

Resident Evil: Revelations places a special device called the Genesis in your hands early on in proceedings. It's a hi-tech scanning gadget that can be used for locating hidden items and researching the corpses of enemies that you've slain. When you swap out your gun for the Genesis and switch into its viewing mode, the screen becomes like an infrared display with a targeting reticule. The effect is reminiscent of *Metroid Prime* and adds an exploratory dimension to the game, which is a pleasant counterpoint to the tension-laden *Resident Evil* staple of shooting monsters in the face.

Reaching the goal is just part of *Furmins*' challenge – what really encourages obsession is collecting all the stars in each level



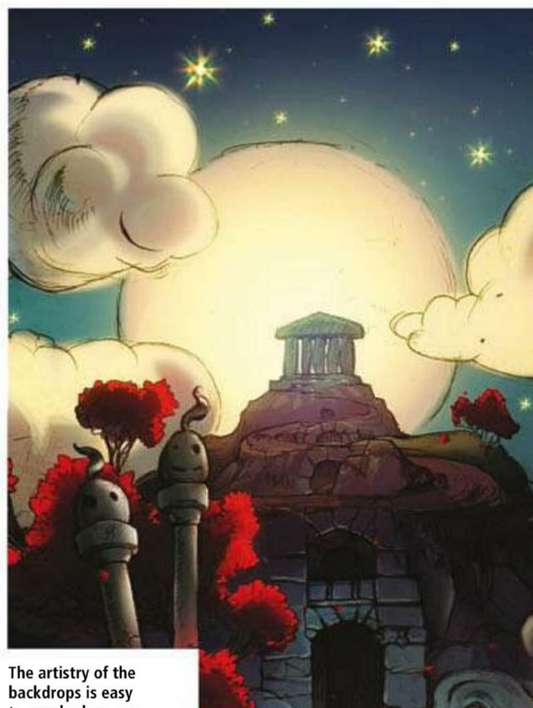




FURMINS

Housemarque heads to iOS for some touchscreen puzzling

Publisher	Housemarque
Developer	In-house
Format	iOS
Origin	Finland
Release	2012



The artistry of the backdrops is easy to overlook as you strategise your way to victory across the levels. They may also prove incentive enough to unlock the full game



www.bit.ly/uEocLO
Screenshot gallery

It's the physics that make *Furmins* a joy in motion, as the creatures roll around the levels before *hopefully* arriving safely at their destination

Love it or loathe it, Rovio's *Angry Birds* is the app to beat. Or, in the case of Housemarque's *Furmins*, it's the game to try to repeat. Rather than being a mere clone of the all-conquering hit, however, *Furmins* takes the *Angry Birds* template and applies some tricks both old and new.

The prime objective is to create a route for the furballs to their goal, positioning platforms, spring pads and cannons around the levels before initiating the turn. The secondary objective, collecting as many stars in the level as possible, is what throws a spanner in the works. Creating the perfect path is a science not a gamble, demanding careful positioning of objects and much trial and error. Platforms that crumble away make things even trickier in the levels we try, but the game's power to keep you coming back to the gorgeously rendered world is undeniable.

If it sounds like a cross between *Lemmings* and *Angry Birds*, that's because it is. Housemarque, having previously worked with Sony to deliver PSN hits like *Super Stardust*, is declaring itself truly independent with *Furmins*, and is keenly aware of the burgeoning iOS market.

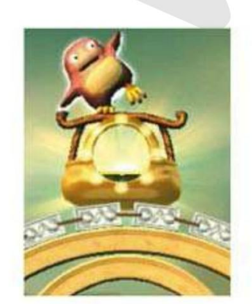
"We want to make Housemarque so that we have our own funding, so we don't have to go to the other publishers and ask if they like a game concept," explains producer **Sami Kostinen**. "The digital download business hasn't been in existence for too many years – it's still kinda new – and I think eventually it is the only thing [that will be] left. I'm not sure how many years that's going to take, but I think that the retail business is starting to change into digital downloads only, because it's a bit old-fashioned."

The move from the home console download space to iOS is also down to some simple number crunching. "The big hits on iOS seem to be bringing more revenue than games on PSN and Live Arcade," Kostinen notes. "I'd say it's much easier to get your game out on iOS because you can just, well, you can make pretty much any kind of game you want. It can be really big or really small."

While *Furmins* is a small game, it's also a beautiful one, powered by the same tech that brought the studio's striking action-platformer *Outland* to PSN and Xbox Live this summer. The game began life as a physics-based prototype and those beginnings are evident as the Furmins roll, bounce and bound across the levels. The hand-painted backdrops are a far cry from the black space and neon of *Stardust*, and show the studio capable of quiet beauty as well as noise and bright lights. It's perhaps unsurprising from a developer that's consistently delivered high-quality games – most of them using Havok physics – in the digital space, and *Furmins*' lengthy production time (close to a year of full-time work) shows.

Housemarque is also taking advantage of the payment options afforded by iOS self-publishing. The premium game will offer 40 levels compared to the freemium's 12 (with both supporting in-app purchases), and there's the added draw of both versions being universal for iOS devices big and small. No flash in the pan, the team has a clear strategic vision for its publishing debut, leaving little to chance and planning to deliver extra content post-release.

As Housemarque's toe in the water of the iOS scene, *Furmins* has every chance of making a big splash. It's polished, intricate but accessible and moreish. Housemarque has clearly studied the competitive market it's braving, and it knows what buttons to press on the device that eschews them. ■



Seal of approval

Producer Sami Kostinen is pleased with what he's seen of the iOS approval system so far: "You can decide when you want to put [a game] out. But then of course there's Apple's approval process, which can take from one to four weeks, but that's about it. So they don't really care what the developer does, so long as it's not racist or that kind of thing. So that's the reason, also, why so many small developers have gone to the iOS devices – because it gives them a chance to try their wings at self publishing, and that's why we want to do it also, because it's a great starting platform."

Gearing up for the digital future

Virgin's up to 50Mb broadband gets you in the game faster than ever before

Mario used to be the only videogame character who travelled through pipes – but times have changed. With digital distribution becoming increasingly standard, online marketplaces such as the App Store, Steam, PlayStation Network and Xbox Live are ushering the next wave of iconic game characters into our homes through a different sort of pipe – one made out of fibre optic broadband. Nothing makes this journey smoother than Virgin's up to 50Mb service, renowned for delivering the swiftest data transfer in the market.

Buying a plastic box with a disc inside already feels antiquated, and stores frequently run out of stock. When a game we've been waiting months (or even years) to play finally gets released, we've already done all the waiting we intend to do. Virgin's screaming-fast up to 50Mb broadband makes sure we're in the game as soon as possible, not sitting around watching a progress bar take its precious time filling up.

Downloadable games were once limited to bite-sized affairs, but as hard-drive capacity increases and the cloud topples storage constraints, game publishers are free to sell full triple-A titles digitally. By upgrading to Virgin Mobile's up to 50Mb broadband, you can shave valuable time off one of these downloads, and you won't even notice a dip in performance when a roommate downloads a movie on another device connected to the network. With Virgin broadband rolling out up to 100Mb and testing speeds of up to 1.5Gb, there's never been a better time for gamers to upgrade those rusty pipes. ■

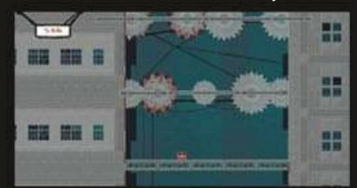
FOUR MUST-HAVE GAMES AVAILABLE NOW VIA DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION



Bastion (XBLA/Steam)
This brawler weaves an unforgettable tale, as a raspy-voiced elder narrates your every move



Drop7 (iOS/Android)
The most immaculately designed puzzler since *Tetris*, with shades of Sudoku and *Bejeweled*



Super Meat Boy (XBLA/Steam)
A super-challenging 2D platformer from Team Meat. Being dead meat has never been so fun



PixelJunk Shooter 2 (PSN)
Q-Games' second outing in its *Shooter* series brings new wrinkles to the whimsical action

PACKAGE DETAILS

1. 48.35Mb is what Virgin Media customers typically enjoy with up to 50Mb
2. Unlimited downloads
3. Free PC security
4. Free super-fast wireless router
5. Unlimited weekend calls to UK landlines and Virgin Mobiles if you take a Virgin phone line
6. Top10.com Fastest Home Broadband Award 2009 and 2010. Best Super-Fast Broadband in the Simplify Digital 2011 Customer Choice Awards

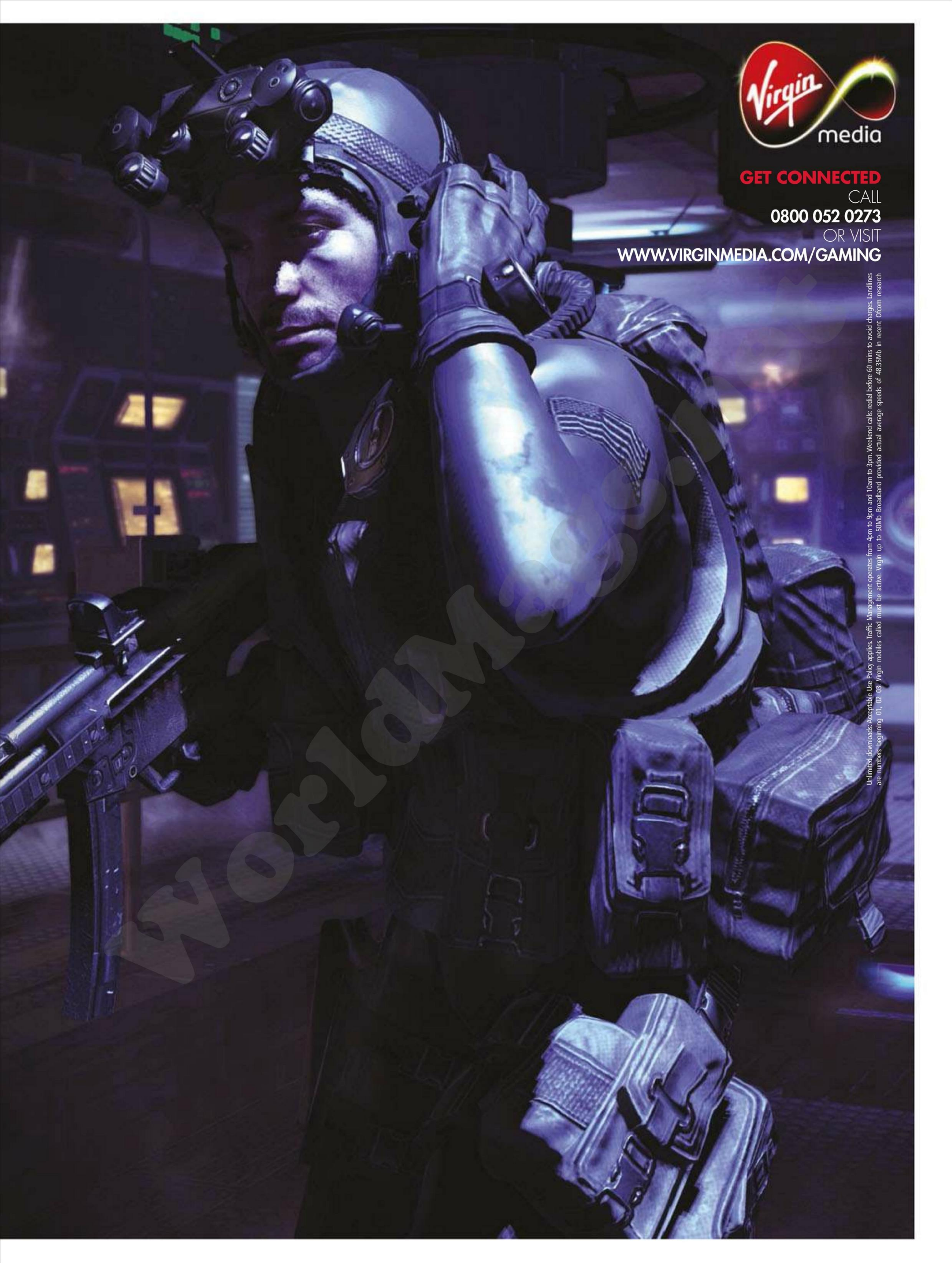
See terms & conditions on virginmedia.com/gaming for more information. Cabled areas only

DATA STREAM

File Size	Virgin 50Mb	Average up to 20/24Mb ADSL Broadband
6Mb	1.1s	6.5s
60Mb	10.7s	1.05m
350Mb	1.0m	6.3m
1.1Gb	3.3m	19.8m
5.6Gb	16.6m	100.9m

"Ofcom comparison data: Virgin up to 50Mb Broadband (actual average speed 48.35); non-Virgin ADSL Broadband providers on up to 20/24Mb (actual average speed 7.4Mb)"

It's not just standalone digitally downloadable games that benefit from Virgin's broadband speeds: pulling down forthcoming DLC for games will be fast and painless too



AN ACCIDENTAL EMPIRE

How Apple became the hottest property in portable videogaming

Apple has changed the videogame industry irrevocably, and the simple truth is that it has changed it without even really trying. It did it with a handheld device that has no buttons, no sticks and no ports for physical media, and it did it with a virtual storefront that was created, in the main, to revolutionise the way people bought music, not videogames. "The success of games on iOS probably has more to do with the beauty and usability of the devices than Apple's intention to make games such a visible part of the content stack," says **Colin Sebastian**, an analyst at RW Baird. Design frothing aside, he's almost certainly pulling his punches. The reality of the situation is that Apple co-founder Steve Jobs never had any interest in videogames, even when he was working at Atari in the mid-'70s. His initial vision for mobile iOS apps was one of connectivity and productivity rather than shooting, bird-flinging and platforming. Apple only came around to the idea that it was in the videogame industry when the videogame industry began to bring in the kind of money that can simply no longer be ignored. In reality, Apple's impact on modern gaming has been far-reaching to the point of ruffling feathers. A recent survey of London Games Conference attendees placed Jobs above the likes of both Shigeru Miyamoto and Gabe Newell to make him the most influential figure in gaming – not an accolade that went down well among various online communities. Despite the fact that there's a topical bias in such opinion polls – and the fact that game developers have never had particularly good long-term memories – the numbers, when you can track them down, are pretty startling, too...

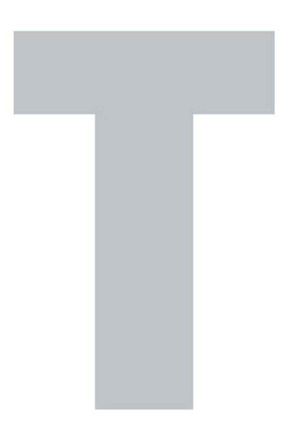
HOW NINTENDO FELL BEHIND

Comparisons between Apple and Nintendo show just how much things have changed in the handheld gaming market. Since 2004, Nintendo has sold more than 149 million DS units, or an average of roughly 9 million every six months during the life of the product. During the six-month period ending September 30, Nintendo sold 3 million 3DS units, 2.6 million DS units, and 3.3 million Wii units. In other words, it is now selling about a tenth of the numbers of portable devices that Apple is selling on a quarterly basis. To date, 6.68 million 3DS units have sold since its debut this spring, and that's after a 40 per cent price cut in August.



Despite taking criticism from some quarters for being iterative rather an entirely new model, Apple's latest iOS device, iPhone 4S, has sold at a phenomenal rate since its release in October

Games account for 85,000 of the App Store's 514,000 active apps, making it by far the largest single category – and that's in a marketplace that has seen 15 billion downloads since its launch in 2008. It's seismic stuff. In 2011, Apple's iOS platform – combined with Google's Android OS – is expected to account for 58 per cent of the entire mobile gaming market. That's compared to 34 per cent in 2010, and a little under 20 per cent in 2009. It's snowball growth, and it's still picking up speed.



HERE HAS TO be a casualty here, of course, and that would be the traditional videogame industry. Sony invested millions when it entered the handheld space with its PSP, and, despite glowing early reviews, it's enjoyed nothing like the success that Apple's found with a device that is, after all, a phone. Meanwhile, Nintendo – the company that almost singlehandedly created the modern handheld market, which set the rules and was presumed to understand the business better than any other company – has seen its share shrinking to a projected 36 per cent for 2011, down from 70 per cent in 2009, according to figures provided by dedicated mobile analytics company Flurry.

> There has to be a casualty here, of course, and that would be the traditional game industry

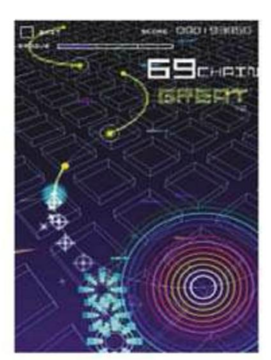
Nintendo reported a disastrous financial result for the six months ending September 30, 2011, losing almost £600 million in that period of time. Partly, it's due to sales falling as its ageing Wii shuffles into retirement, but the company's gains in the handheld market were meant to alleviate its losses the living room. Instead, its 3DS struggled from the moment it was launched. The console's retail price has been slashed to a point at which Nintendo is actually losing money on the hardware, and it's been hastily repositioned in advertisements, thanks to the general public's apparent ambivalence to its key feature, an autostereoscopic 3D display.

This isn't just about the difficulties involved in building a business around an innovative display, though. It's a lot more serious than that. It's the price and the delivery method that customers are rejecting. Apple has fundamentally changed consumers' perception of what a mobile game represents, rewriting the rules of what it's worth and how it's accessed. Nintendo may make the kind of products capable of sending audiences to the shops to part with £30, but it can't make them very often, and few thirdparty developers can make such games at all. The new handheld gaming audience expects to buy its games for under a fiver – indeed, it often expects them for free – and to have them delivered all but instantaneously, at the tap of a virtual button.

Apple isn't just changing methods of delivery and pricing structures, however. It's also helped to broaden the scope of games, and all without developing any firstparty titles itself. New genres are emerging, while designers are beginning to shake off age-old preoccupations with science-fiction, fantasy and the military. There are games about migrating birds now, and games about

50 MUST-PLAY IOS GAMES

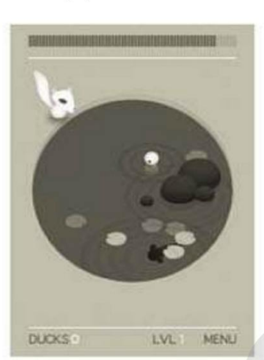
Three years and hundreds of thousands of apps later, what are the best games on the App Store?



GROOVE COASTER
TAITO CORP
www.bit.ly/vmQSrE
Blending precision beat-matching with wireframe obstacle courses enables TAITO to bring a cinematic simplicity to iOS music games.



NUMBA
COBRA MOBILE LTD
www.bit.ly/rM4ysd
Maths is kept to a minimum while the score chains take centre stage in this ugly but compulsive pattern-spotting game.



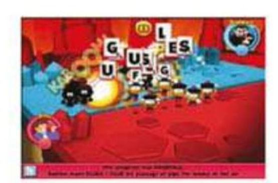
FOX VS DUCK
SUPERMONO
www.bit.ly/vVciUg
Beneath the stylishly bare visuals lies a horror game of unusual force in which you steer your ducks past a determined predator.



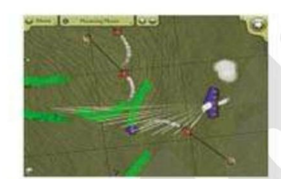
TRAINYARD
MATT RIX
www.bit.ly/sMUmVG
These logic tests are disguised with just the thinnest coating of locomotive fiction. Matt Rix's lo-fi opus will tie your brain in knots.



DROP7
ZYNGA
www.bit.ly/t6NOfD
Drop7 is the purest puzzler since *Tetris*: a blend of abstract geology and maths that rewards you with endless strategic opportunities.



QUARREL
DENKI
www.bit.ly/sn6kUH
Quarrel's multiplayer may still be missing in action, but this demanding mixture of *Risk* and *Scrabble* is game enough alone.



STEAMBIRDS
RADIAL GAMES, SPRY FOX
www.bit.ly/vX2gAf
SteamBirds takes the glorious concept of turn-based dogfighting and spins it into an elegant tactical arcade-style game.



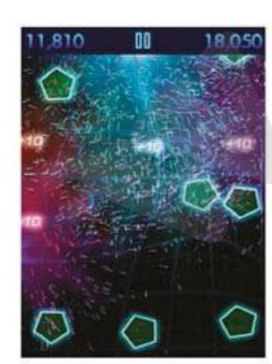
SPY MOUSE
FIREMINT
www.bit.ly/uaRSUA
Firemint drags stealth out of military bases and into a series of 1950s interiors with this brilliantly cheeky game of cat and mouse.



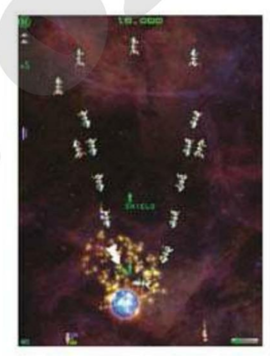
TRUNDLE
MOBILE BROS.
www.bit.ly/rsaJmP
Trundle rolls on to the App Store with a colourful silhouetted art style and a range of smart levels that encourage replaying.



CANABALT
SEMI SECRET SOFTWARE
www.bit.ly/sunlYi
Canabalt has spawned a dozen imitators, but when it comes to style and control, this sci-fi distance runner is still the best.



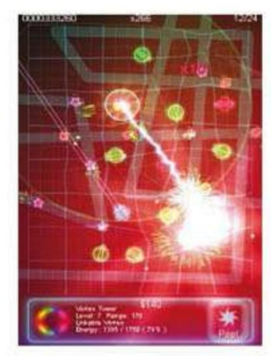
GEOSPARK
CRITICAL THOUGHT GAMES
www.bit.ly/u8vTpX
This mix of pattern recognition and collision avoidance remains the closest thing the App Store has to its own *Asteroids*.



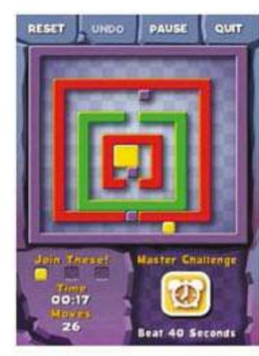
WARBLADE
EMV SOFTWARE AS
www.bit.ly/rYN6rQ
Warblade is a likeably direct old-school shooter that's enlivened by a series of great weapon upgrades and unlocks.



SWORD & POKER
GAIA
www.bit.ly/w1TsdN
The blunt name sums up this weirdly enjoyable Roguelike in which you fight monsters by building poker hands.



GEODEFENSE
CRITICAL THOUGHT GAMES
www.bit.ly/sheRIO
GeoDefense defines itself with a series of brisk and punishing levels in which a single mistake can cost you the game.



DENKI BLOCKS!
DENKI
www.bit.ly/t2EpLm
Slide blocks around and gather colours together in a series of spatial challenges that manage to be both relaxing and complex.

THE ANDROID INVASION

Apple may have brought an end to Nintendo's dominance of handheld gaming, but it's already facing threats of its own, the largest of which comes from Google, whose Android OS is used by dozens of phone and tablet makers. There may currently be 250 million iOS devices in use around the world, in contrast to just 190 million running Android, but Google's platform is growing faster than Apple's, the number of daily Android phone activations now beating iPhone stats by a wide margin.

Android already boasts a 52.5 per cent share of the worldwide smartphone market, compared to Apple's 15 per cent, while developers are increasingly lured away from iOS by Google's far simpler approval process, which sees games appearing on the Android Store immediately, avoiding the bureaucracy and unpredictable rejections that can characterise submissions to iTunes. On top of that, the market research firm Xyologic recently forecasted that Android would overtake iOS in app downloads by the summer of 2012.

Where there is still a significant gap between the two platforms, however, is in terms of revenue, with the App Store having generated around $5 billion dollars from downloads compared to just $330 million from Android. For the time being, then, Apple has the audience that's most willing to part with its money, so its supremacy – in the short term, at least – seems guaranteed.

cartoonish lab experiments. And they're selling by the millions. To any traditional game-publishing exec, accustomed to struggling to make anything remotely risky catch fire with the console-owning masses, it must be an enervating sight. At the same time, new funding models, based around regular updates and audience feedback, are blurring the lines between the minimum viable products favoured by Facebook developers and the standard polish of a console offering.

T**HERE'S A DARK** side to such a thin barrier between a publisher and its audience – there are plenty of micro-transaction iOS games powered by unnecessarily grindy game mechanics – but there are also positive feedback loops emerging, such as the model that's been all but perfected by Rovio. The studio responsible for *Angry Birds* rewards its players for loyalty and recommendations in an astonishingly direct way: keep the game in the charts and you'll get more free content. It's hard to feel exploited by such well-balanced symbiosis.

Rovio rewards its players for loyalty: keep Angry Birds in the charts and you'll get more free content

If anything, the app charts may be too powerful, with the bulk of sales reserved for developers that can keep their games within the top 25, or at least the top 50. Cloning is rife, original titles can be buried at release among cheap kludges, and with 80,000 games jostling for attention through iTunes – a delivery mechanism that is singularly weak at organisation, creating discovery issues for consumers – getting a hit game on iOS can seem a little like winning the lottery. At the Game Developers Conference in March of this year, **Trip Hawkins**, founder of Digital Chocolate and an early proponent of iOS gaming, highlighted the fact that the billions of dollars generated by the App Store were divided up among so many developers that the average revenue per title would have to be around $4,000 if it was split evenly (which it obviously isn't). "That doesn't even pay for a good foosball table," he noted. It's a sobering thought, especially when you consider the current trend for seasoned designers, like the staff of Black Rock Studios in Brighton, leaving console development behind to form their own studios focused on making a living out of iOS game production.

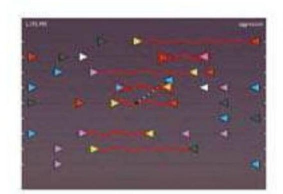
But it's hard not to agree with **Giordano Contestabile**, the franchise business director for *Bejeweled* at PopCap Games, when he claimed that Apple had unwittingly "created a viable ecosystem and market for mobile games, where before we had an anaemic and fragmented landscape".

Apple has given developers standardised target hardware to aim for, and provided an environment in which quality games can rise to the top, and where excellent design is often rewarded with real sales. It's changed the business model, the design philosophy, and even the interface of modern handheld games. The question is, what is Apple going to do next?

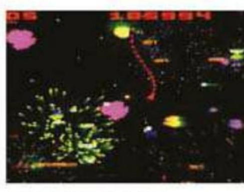
On the mobile front, it's already begun to tackle the discovery issue through Game Center, a social hub that provides a lot of the infrastructure that console and PC audiences expect,



ROLANDO 2
HANDCIRCUS
www.bit.ly/t2EpLm
With *Rolando 2*, micro-studio HandCircus can put the *LocoRoco* comparisons behind it. Here it rolls out a rich campaign for its rotund creations that's filled with plenty of imaginative high points.



HALCYON
ZACH GAGE
www.bit.ly/rEeuld
Colour matching and line tracing come together in this austere and often powerfully challenging puzzle game from one of the world's most intriguing indie developers, Zach Gage.



MINOTAUR RESCUE
LLAMASOFT
www.bit.ly/tLnnsZ
Asteroids provides the basis for Llamasoft's App Store debut, but with floating ungulates, devastating black holes and peerless tech, it's more reinvention than homage.



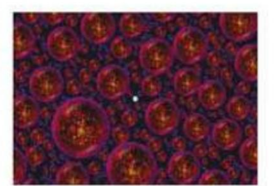
HOOK WORLDS
ROCKETCAT GAMES
www.bit.ly/w0s5i4
Hook Worlds is the best instalment in Rocketcat's brilliant swing 'em up series, giving you four unique challenges to master and some wonderfully pulpy environments to explore.



SUPER CROSSFIRE HD
RADIAN GAMES
www.bit.ly/vBqOm3
Space Invaders gets a screen-flipping twist. Radian Games gives you the power to switch your turret's position between the top and bottom of the screen, and the result is breathtaking.



NO, HUMAN
ROLF FLEISCHMANN
www.bit.ly/tqDNO3
God shows His vengeful side in this unusually atmospheric game of deep-space billiards. It's both darkly witty and impossible to leave unfinished.



OSMOS
HEMISPHERE GAMES
www.bit.ly/sx69HC
Whether you're blasting through deep space or zipping around the nucleus of an atom, Hemisphere's physics-based puzzle game is an elegant joy to control.



PAPA SANGRE
SOMETHIN' ELSE
www.bit.ly/uaGKiR
After decades of neglect, audio replaces visuals in this unusual horror game that has you navigating dangerous environs by audio cues alone.



SPIDER: THE SECRET OF BRYCE MANOR TIGER STYLE GAMES
www.bit.ly/rFMtvT
An early App Store favourite, *Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor* marries its sprightly fly-capturing levels with a surprising appetite for visual narrative.



STAR DEFENSE
NGMOCO
www.bit.ly/tNP73v
Star Defense's 3D planetoids create tower defence levels that constantly toy with your field of view, but it's the unit balance that makes this essential.



FRUIT NINJA
HALFBRICK
www.bit.ly/ulX1od
Halfbrick's first App Store success remains its most appealing game. It's an arcade-style slice 'em up enlivened by brilliant audio and some wonderfully juicy visuals.



DRAWRACE 2
REDLYNX
www.bit.ly/uUBm95
RedLynx's twitchy classic replaces steering with tracing and builds its entire mechanics around the search for the perfect racing line. Dazzling stuff.



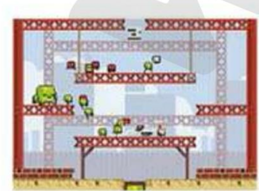
FIELDRUNNERS
SUBATOMIC STUDIOS
www.bit.ly/sJK89v
Subatomic Studios doesn't bring many new ideas to the tower defence genre, but precision controls and a fuss-free interface make it a perfect fit for iOS.



INFINITY FIELD
FORZEFIELD STUDIOS
www.bit.ly/rvewMh
No points for originality, but ForzeField's responsive twin-stick controls almost redeem reusing a catalogue of ideas you may recognise from *Geometry Wars*.



BACKBREAKER FOOTBALL
NATURALMOTION
www.bit.ly/ulLiqp
Backbreaker slices football down to the bone, focusing on an endless race to the end zone as you juke, dodge, and showboat your way up the leaderboard.



SUPER CRATE BOX HD
VLAMBEER, HALFBOT
www.bit.ly/vdtZgh
Super Crate Box is a run-and-gunner of devious simplicity and near-endless replayability. It's perhaps Vlambeer's best work yet.



SUPERBROTHERS: SWORDS & SWORCERY EP CAPYBARA GAMES
www.bit.ly/vT4On0
Superbrothers is a luminous audiovisual adventure, filled with delicate, muted pixel art and Jim Guthrie's folksy noodlings.



JETPACK JOYRIDE
HALFBRICK
www.bit.ly/vviNES
If you can accept that the progression system is also the core of the game, *Jetpack Joyride* is a wholly engaging score-chaser.



TILT TO LIVE
ONE MAN LEFT STUDIOS
www.bit.ly/suJQ0u
One Man Left lays its tilty-turny game in the lap of the iPhone accelerometer, but the weapon upgrades are what win the day.



INFINITY BLADE
CHAIR ENTERTAINMENT
www.bit.ly/t5Q71p
Chair's pretty spin on *Punch-Out!!* is also an RPG that's built like a Möbius strip, with a looping narrative and plenty of levelling.

FACEBOOK AND F2P

When it comes to platforms that are shaping the modern gaming industry, it's hard to think of two more significant players than iOS and Facebook. Yet while Apple may have the better games, the social network can often see better returns.

Take Zynga and SGN, two Facebook game companies that have both considered branching out onto iOS over the past few years. Zynga dipped its toe into App Store waters, but quickly concluded that Facebook was where the real money could be found, and is now one of the most successful developers in the industry. SGN, meanwhile, made a complete transition to iOS and has struggled.

IOS has been learning from Facebook, however, and the introduction of in-app purchasing has seen more and more iPhone and iPad developers make the transition to the social network's brand of free-to-play games, where revenues come from microtransactions. Neil Young, chief executive of publisher Ngmoco, was one of the first to identify the possibilities of the model, repositioning his entire company, and transforming its ailing fortunes around in the process.

By the spring of 2011, half of the top 25 grossing iOS games were free-to-play titles, suggesting that while Apple may not be openly competing with Facebook, it's definitely been able to take some valuable tips from the social network.



The current Apple TV model costs £100 in the UK and $100 in the US

while simultaneously making it easier for popular titles to spread by virtual word of mouth. It's a small step, granted, and with its drawing-room billiards felt and polished-wood interface, you can feel a little of the company's disdain for games lingering, but it's step in the right direction.

Elsewhere – and a lot more significantly – there's the fact that the hardware itself keeps getting better. The recently released iPhone 4S can produce graphics that rival the first wave of Xbox 360 games, while middleware providers like Unity and Epic are making it easier for the small teams that favour iOS to make games that at least look the part. The more expansive iPad, meanwhile, is allowing developers to experiment with more complex interfaces spread across a larger screen, and it's also done a little to halt the disastrous race to 69p that has made it so hard for iPhone developers to risk spending money on a project. The iPad game market does a good job of supporting releases weighing in at £4.99, and that means studios can allow for a more conventional development schedule so long as they have a visibility strategy for release.

> "What we've seen on phones and tablets will happen with app stores coming to a TV near you soon"

THE NEXT MOVE by Apple, however, may not lurk in the handheld market, where the company is already more than comfortable. It may arrive in the living room, and with it, in the collective nightmares of both Sony and Microsoft. Apple TV may yet to have made much of an impact as a set-top box, but the device can already stream video and music content from iTunes accounts, making a shift to include games a practical inevitability. "The same trend we've seen on phones and tablets will happen with app stores coming to a TV near you soon," Sebastian says, and few would disagree with him. The form they're going to take, however, is harder to predict.

The first question concerns how big these games are going to be. The 2010 Apple TV redesign removed the unit's hard drive, relying instead on 8GB of Flash storage and the ability to stream most of its content wirelessly. Companies like Gaikai and OnLive have proven that the thin client model can support modern PC games, but that only raises another issue: even if Apple goes down that road – and, really, it's seen enough success with *Angry Birds* to render traditional gaming genres rather niche – how are you going to be controlling them? It's hard to see a company so in love with clean lines and smooth edges ever resorting to the awkward pragmatism of a modern game controller, with its D-pads and jutting thumbsticks. Steve Jobs resisted the urge to put an on/off switch on iPods, and Apple's unlikely to be committing to triggers any time soon.

A much more likely scenario is that iPads and iPhones will be put to work as ad-hoc pads. With in-built accelerometers, they're already able to rival motion controllers, while, when it comes to multitouch inputs and HD displays, they're a significant improvement on Nintendo's controllers for its forthcoming Wii U console, which essentially behave like enlarged



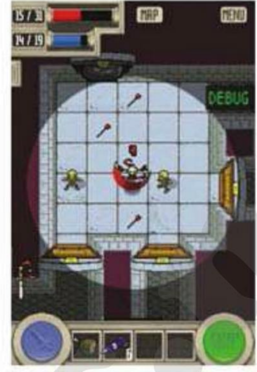
HELSING'S FIRE
RATLOOP
www.bit.ly/uk9DzJ
Vampire hunting is transformed into a series of inventive area-control brainteasers in this dazzlingly creative and wonderfully surprising game.



GRAVITY HOOK HD
SEMI SECRET SOFTWARE
www.bit.ly/vs6ICD
From *Canabalt*'s creator comes another go-the-distance gem, which trades rooftops for a grappling hook, a huge cavern, and a host of floating mines.



DODONPACHI RESURRECTION
CAVE CO.
www.bit.ly/rORlRz
Arcade shooter *DoDonPachi* is a brilliant blend of bullet scraping and kill chaining, and Cave coaxes astonishing degrees of precision from touchscreens for this edition.



100 ROGUES
FUSION REACTIONS
www.bit.ly/uUVkCE
Updates have seen *100 Rogues* steadily expand into a fully realised dungeon crawler, with all the loot, classes and procedural surprises you could hope for.



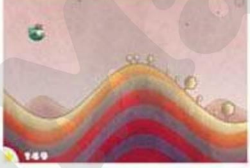
BLOCK ROGUE
BUZZ MONKEY
www.bit.ly/vb7MnY
Buzz Monkey's ingenious block-roller sees a hero working his way through a branching series of levels and piecing a surprisingly decent story back together.




WHALE TRAIL
USTWO
www.bit.ly/sq1jry
Ustwo takes the *Canabalt* template and pours on the charm, sending you on a colourful journey past rainbows, storm clouds and plenty of spilled ink.



FLIGHT CONTROL
FIREMINT
www.bit.ly/rBd25I
Firemint's trace 'em up is the most relaxing game about mid-air collisions ever made: a dreamy muddle of planes and runways that can eat commutes whole.



TINY WINGS
ANDREAS ILLIGER
www.bit.ly/t68ag3
Tiny Wings is defined by its lovely swooping control scheme as you race for the horizon, and smart optional objectives that tinker creatively with the formula.



DARK MEADOW
PHOSPHOR GAMES
www.bit.ly/tYXHfM
Stylish firstperson horror by way of Epic's Unreal Engine 3, *Dark Meadow* is smart as well as pretty, with a one-tap movement system and effective combat.



SOLIPSKIER
MIKENGREG
www.bit.ly/ue3w3i
Solipskier has both substance and style. While you can grind out scores on its elegant slopes by playing it safe, virtuosos earn points with speed and flair.




THE BLOCKS COMETH
HALFBOT
www.bit.ly/sZa8DM
This challenging platformer could best be described as 'survival *Tetris*'. You clamber up mountains of falling blocks while avoiding a blow to the head.



THE LAST ROCKET
SHAUN INMAN
www.bit.ly/sHr6i2
The Last Rocket keeps its levels short and its controls precise. Each stage introduces new ideas, and the learning curve is matched only by a melancholy sweetness.



DUNGEON RAID
ALEX KUPTSOV
www.bit.ly/vJP3sr
Alex Kuptsov's sparse charmer blends the worlds of the RPG and the gem-matcher far more successfully than the likes of *Puzzle Quest* and its ilk.



ZEN BOUND
SECRET EXIT LTD
www.bit.ly/v38Lap
An iTunes classic thanks to a dreamy premise that sees you wrapping strange objects with rope, *Zen Bound* is a captivating blend of concept and controls.



WORDS WITH FRIENDS
NEWTOY INC
www.bit.ly/t2hPUS
A contemporary phenomenon as much as a reworking of *Scrabble, Words With Friends* is also the perfect example of the asynchronous multiplayer game.

FIXING THE CHARTS

Thanks in part to the discovery issues presented by iTunes' awkward interface, the top 100 app charts have become the central battleground for developers hoping to make money on iOS. When your game is selling for 69p – or, as is increasingly the case, when it's being given away for free and relies on in-app purchases – getting into the top 25 can be the difference between having a hit and going bankrupt, so it's no wonder that the charts are prone to manipulation.

Apple's now started to take such trends seriously, which is why, in early 2011, it revamped its listings procedure, targeting incentive-based app installations and removing them from the rankings entirely. This approach to upselling, perfected by the company Tapjoy, saw developers advertising each others' products within their own games and sharing the revenues from any downloads, while the customers – often children – were given a free virtual item for their trouble. The end result would often be a glut of incentivised games clogging the top 25 lists, many of which would be downloaded only to then go unplayed.

The changes represent a step in the right direction, but with so much riding on the charts, Apple faces a constant threat from developers trying to get ahead. Banned from competing on iTunes, meanwhile, many incentive-based apps have simply made the transition to Android, where such techniques have yet to be outlawed.

DS screens (albeit with additional buttons), and do not even feature multitouch functionality.

In other words, Apple's grab for the main television in the home is unlikely to be a full-scale embracing of living-room gaming – and it's difficult to imagine ever getting an entirely satisfying game of *Call Of Duty* going with touchscreens and data streaming in the mix. That said, Apple's assault on the mobile market was hardly traditional, either, and it succeeded despite the fact that Sony and Nintendo were expending a lot more effort in the very same space.



ERHAPS APPLE'S AMBITIONS for gaming extend no further than AirPlay Mirroring, introduced via the release of iOS5 in October. This functionality allows iPad 2 and iPhone 4S owners to essentially live stream their devices' audio and video to a television via Apple TV. The benefits for sharing photos, videos and other content are obvious, but in the hands of those willing to push the feature, it becomes transformative. Most game apps played using AirPlay Mirroring simply have what you see on the handheld device's screen replicated on the television panel, with borders at the left and right, but a growing number are taking advantage of the nuances of the feature and providing full-screen 1080p visuals on the target device while the display in your hands provides supplementary content. A brilliant example of the feature is demonstrated by Firemint's *Real Racing 2 HD*, whose motion-controlled steering, coupled with great all-round attention to detail, makes it feel like a convincing proposition on the big screen. Since games that use AirPlay Mirroring suffer the slight delays involved with anything being pinged around a Wi-Fi network, it obviously isn't an experience that compares like-for-like with games such as *Forza 4*, but it's proof that the world's best iOS game developers are taking the functionality seriously. Since Apple TV market penetration is slim compared to that of iPhone and iPad, for now only committed Apple fans will get to enjoy the fruits of such labours, but it's a gaming avenue worth watching closely.

Perhaps Apple's gaming ambitions extend no further than AirPlay Mirroring, via Apple TV

If the big three are about to lose the living room to a rival that has still yet to attend its first E3, yet to create a firstparty game studio, and yet to release hardware that's been specifically created with videogames in mind, the loss will not be without its lessons, at least. Apple may have proven that success in games doesn't involve courting the industry as much as simply getting out of designers' way, removing all but the most basic approval processes for its platforms, providing the simplest of marketplaces and allowing the whole process of publishing, advertising, and setting prices to take care of itself. Apple's success in the Jobs era was down to it building technology that people wanted to use, and then standing back to allow them to use it – stepping in, of course, for an easy 30 per cent revenue cut whenever a sale is made. It's game publishing without the risks. And, from the evidence presented so far, it just works. ■

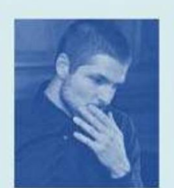
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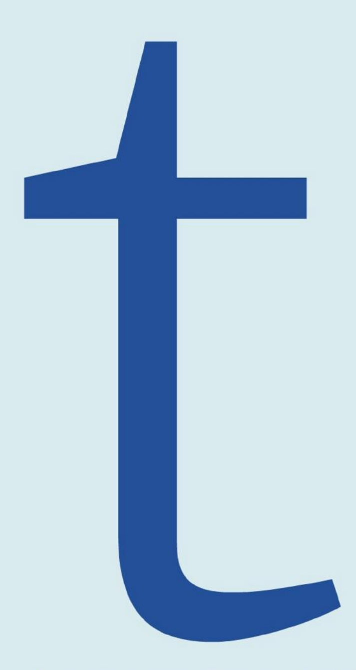
definitions of the modern indie game

robin hunicke
producer, thatgamecompany
jakub dvorsky
founder, amanita design
dino patti
ceo, playdead
brian provinciano
independent developer

four leading developers share their views on avant-garde game design





he mainstream videogame industry, like Hollywood, is a production line of marketable high concepts and 'sure-fire' franchises. With teams now hitting 200 and budgets in the multimillions of dollars, the number of original and innovative projects seems to dwindle a little more each year. This industrial process has birthed marvels like *Uncharted* and *Skyrim*, but it has also brought about a culture in which the genre is king, and where design is by committee.

So, what's it like working outside of the system? Do indie developers think of themselves as avant-garde artists, testing the boundaries of the medium? Is there a conscious effort to bring subjectivity and expressionism to projects like *Limbo* or *Journey*, or are these qualities just the natural by-products of smaller development teams and tighter budgets?

Four leading lights of the contemporary indie scene will help us discover the answers. **Robin Hunicke** from thatgamecompany is the producer of *Journey* and a passionate advocate of emotional game design; **Jakub Dvorsky** is founder of Amanita Design, the Czech studio behind handcrafted adventures *Machinarium* and *Samorost*; **Dino Patti** is the CEO of PlayDead, creator of monochrome XBLA oddity *Limbo*; and **Brian Provinciano**, once of Backbone Entertainment, is now working on much-anticipated NES homage *Retro City Rampage*. The deceptively straightforward matter at hand: are indie games weird on purpose?

None of your games are orthodox or 'realistic' in terms of visuals or themes. Is that a conscious decision? Do you deliberately set out to be surreal or expressionistic?

Brian Provinciano My game is hugely expressionistic, but at the same time it's less about being art and more about being the game I want to play.

Robin Hunicke We're certainly super-conscious of wanting to make something that provides a fresh perspective or a new experience, something that values other people's time and feels handcrafted. Those elements are always in what we make. And when I first played *Machinarium* and *Limbo*, I found the same values. We share similar feelings about what quality is, or maybe why one should make a game.

Jakub Dvorsky That handcrafted feel is an important part of our approach. Most of us in the studio came from animation – we are artists, we studied at art school, so we write games in the same way we'd do animated movies. But interactivity is also very important. We don't think about making artistic games; we just want to make something beautiful.

How about at PlayDead? *Limbo* has an expressionistic look – did you all focus on art during production?

Dino Patti Not at all! I can only second what these two are saying. At our studio we have only one director, Arnt Jensen. We try to get all of his ideas in and make them work. But none of us think in that way. For us, it's just about creating something that we think is amazing.

RH It's really important not to feel like you have to communicate what *you* believe the game to be. When it goes out there, the players need to really own it. Their experience is what matters.

JD Just continuing what Dino said, it is very important that there is only one director on a project, one creator who is the mind behind the whole experience. Of course, other people help him and can influence the game heavily, but there should only be one author. I am the author of *Machinarium* but our next game *Botanicula*, is made by our animator, Jara Plachy. I am helping to make it as good as possible, but he's the auteur, he decides everything.

But this is all very different to how game development works in the mainstream, where it often feels like everything is arranged by committee.

DP It *is* about the team also – everyone can influence the gameplay. But it's really important that one person takes the controls. If nothing else, you get to blame him if it's bad!


From left: Jacub Dvorsky, Dino Patti, Brian Provinciano and Robin Hunicke

Do you think that one of the problems of mainstream games is that they don't have an auteur at the centre of it all, that they're totally democratic? Doesn't this lead to blander, less subjective games?
DP I think too many triple-A developers ask people what they want and then create it for them. You know: "How many cars should we have? How many guns?" Then they create what they think people want.
BP I've seen that so often! One rant of mine is about the game design document. I've been at studios where they've written 300-page design docs for a sequel that's already had eight games in the series. And all it does is list enemy types, and this ingredient, that ingredient... It's not really going to make a fun game. It's like trying to write a music design document for a song that just says: 'OK, it's going to go up a key here and down here.' That doesn't make a good song!
RH It should be about wanting to bring something from within, whether it's one person or a team. The vision is about communicating between the developer and the player, it's not about a feature set or what kind of value you can extract from the customer, or whether the idea is emerging from a 'hot sector'! That kind of language isn't true to the spirit of creating *anything*. It's also about learning and growing – you want to feel that you became a better person because you made something. It should make you feel stronger!
BP There's a big problem in a lot of the larger companies where they focus so much on 'features'. They'll hire such a big team, and they'll take one guy and say, "OK, you have to build a trading card system for this game", because they've noticed how successful *Pokémon* is. I've seen this happen! And the result has no sense of personal expression – it just feels like it came off some production line. Everything is a checklist.

Do you feel that, in some way, your projects all comment on games and the possibilities of games? That tends to be a feature of more subjective artworks.
BP Yes, I mean, *Retro City Rampage* is essentially a homage. But the missions I'm most proud of are those where I could make fun experiences out of making fun of things! I'd take things like a car-tailing mission, which are normally so boring I have to keep drinking coffee to stay awake. So in the game your character has to keep rushing into coffee shops during the mission without losing the car. It's silly, but it's such fun.
RH We're very conscious of the fact that our games should be experimental, they should be exploratory, they should push at the boundaries. So we're always playing games, talking about them, discussing the future of games. And as long as we're working on something that's pushing those boundaries, we know we're on the right path. If we're discussing whether or not a particular feature should remain in the game it will always come down to, well, is it new? Is it fresh? Does it create something people wouldn't expect? In that way we're very aware of what games are, but we're always looking toward what they could be.
JD We are a little more conservative [laughs]. But we *are* trying to evolve the adventure genre and to think of new puzzle ideas. We think about our games as toys: you should be playing the game not to finish it or to beat it, but to enjoy the experience. So for *Samarost 3* we're adding several interactive toys where the goal is just to play and to enjoy even if you've finished the game. Atmosphere is very important to us – sounds, music, playfulness. We think about our games like movies or books – their value transcends the ending. When you finish a book, you can read it again a few years later. That's what we want.

You mentioned audio there – how does that particular element fit in with more subjective games? Is it an important factor in conjuring a more expressionistic feel for your game?
DP It's very important. When I worked out the budgets for *Limbo*, I underestimated everything to do with the sound. We ended up finding this really awesome audio designer, Martin Stig Andersen, and as soon as we realised how good he was,

"it is very important that there is only one director on a project, one creator who is the mind behind the whole experience"

jakub dvorsky

we just put in more money — I just grabbed it from other areas of the budget!
RH We work with a composer almost from the beginning of a project. It's like Dino said, the sound budget is so critical, you have to just pull from wherever you can to support it. We work with Austin Wintory on the music itself, and then we have help from Sony Santa Monica and Sony San Diego in terms of designing the soundscape as well as implementing the score in a way that is interactive and reflective of your actions and the state of the game. When we create a moment, a feeling, a huge component of that is the audio. Just recently, we went through a period when the audio tool was being updated so there was no music in the game. It was impossible to evaluate it! You would find yourself trying to fix problems that didn't exist before the sound was gone. It's so essential to the design. When it's not there, the game is just completely broken. I was so moved by the audio in *Botanicula* — the sounds and the character voices have a handmade quality — it's so personal, you feel like you're watching a little puppet show. That creates a real connection. And in *Journey* if you're going to be drifting through the air and gliding on sand, you need to have this beautiful orchestral score — hearing real strings and vocal tones that have been manipulated to create a mysterious quality. It's completely integral to the feeling.
JD Yes, the sound has to fit the visuals which have to fit the gameplay. Everything must flow together. We record all the sounds ourselves; for *Machinarium*, I recorded them all in our cottage. It was a lot of fun, making noises, banging bits of rusty metal together. And the sound recordings are also a bit dirty and ragged like the visuals.
BP For years I was working on *Retro City Rampage* by myself and because I can't compose music, it didn't have audio. As soon as that was in, I realised how much it was missing. A friend of mine is working on a vertical slice for a project right now and I told him, "Get audio in the game *immediately*". I'm now working with three sound guys — I mean, who knew that a game that uses one programmer and a part-time artist would need three music guys? But they were so talented I wanted their stuff in my game. Most of the time I'll tell them to just record whatever they want. Have fun! And that has actually inspired me to create certain levels and missions, just from a song.

It seems that indie games, perhaps because of their subjectivity, have a much better understanding of how audio can be exploited to create moods and emotions. It doesn't have to be about vastly expensive soundtracks.
RH Yeah, I mean there are these low-level systems in our brains, things that have been around for a long time. They connect directly to your heart, your desires and your needs — and games can get to them. If you can create an ambience, through visuals or audio, or with the tactile quality of the game, you can create real emotions in people, in the same way that music is able to bring you through an emotional experience. What's interesting and scary about that is it's a lot of power! It's something we really need to take seriously. It should be used for good!
BP That reminds me of another aspect of design. I strive to make my game a smooth, fluid experience. The idea is that, OK, people might not necessarily notice all the cool features, but if there's a flow state, they will miss the flaws! Subconsciously it just feels good because they haven't had those stumbling moments. That goes back to what Robin was saying about appealing to the unconscious, to the reptilian brain. It's… invisible polish.
RH That's a great phrase for it!

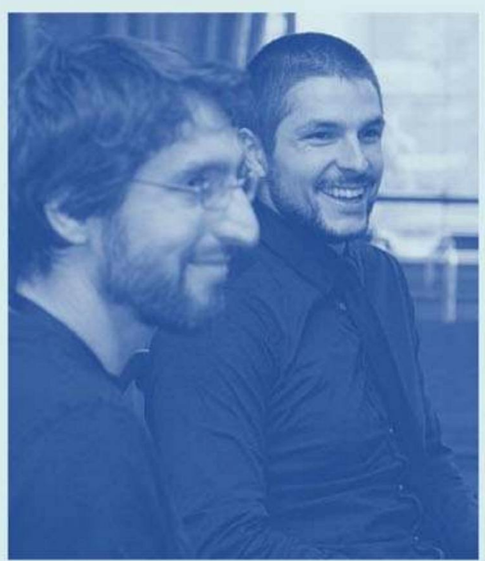
Is it difficult to communicate all this to the media during development? It seems like a big marketing challenge.
DP Spending a lot of money on marketing is a waste. We tried to think of new ideas, new ways to get *Limbo* out there. We used a lot of free PR, showing it to the right people. I actually think it would have degraded *Limbo*, to put it in a banner ad with some kind of tag line. People wanted to learn more about it, but we kept things quiet until we were ready to talk. That way, when we *did* come forward, there were people listening.

How about external influences? The mainstream game industry can be insular, often looking only as far as its own past or toward Hollywood or comic books for inspiration. Do you consciously look elsewhere?
JD Inspiration comes from life itself. You've got to read books, go outside, do drugs. Just live. It's no good for game designers just being sat by a computer playing games. That's sometimes necessary, but it shouldn't be everything.
RH Yeah, life is short. I just finished reading Cloud Atlas, and it's been in the back of my mind continuously. I was incredibly moved by the story arc of the book, but also by the way in which it channelled my feelings toward a need for resolution. There was a point I just became incredibly sad. I really felt for one of the characters and the struggles she was having. And I almost put the book down because it was too painful to contemplate. But I pushed through and it was almost like climbing the mountain in *Journey*. Maybe I just see mountains everywhere now.

"there are these low-level systems in our brains, things that connect directly to your heart, and games can get to them"

robin hunicke

BP I feel my game is a voice. People who play it are going to get to know me, because it has a lot of things in there, nods to things I liked when I was a child, nods to friends and things like that. There are also things in the city that are comments on contemporary issues, like the food industry, like social issues in Vancouver. The game isn't just for people who feel nostalgic about Ninja Turtles. It's like a scrapbook about me, set in this open world. You can see the layers if you look deep enough.



Do you think, then, that your game environments are more about conveying a mood than a definite sense of place?

RH When I play *Machinarium*, there's a dystopian ambience, it is a rusted world, and there's this alienated guy having all these problems but they're beyond his control. It's like the movie Brazil – it's a feeling of meandering through a giant set of rules, the superstructure of society. I knew it wasn't made by Americans. There is a sad beauty to it.

JD We're continuing the tradition of animated film in eastern Europe. But the meaning doesn't have to be intentional. When you have a very small team, if they are passionate about the game, if they create it as a piece of art, not as a commercial product, there's often a message even if they don't put it there. Our games are like fairytales – they're archetypes, they're about how we react to the world. A writer writes from his own personal experiences of the world, so somehow whatever he intends, the message comes through.

BP It's all about passion and ownership. Ownership is the reason I left triple-A game development – I felt like a cog in the machine. I almost wondered, 'Am I actually working on a game? I'm just sitting here programming. What's the difference between me working on this and writing a piece of business software?'

Lots of modern art movements make room for the accidental in their work. Is there space for that in game development, too?

RH Absolutely. There are features in *Journey*, especially visual effects, that came from glitches. There might have been a mistake, or someone tried something that didn't work and it had a quality to it we liked. That was definitely part of our process. One of the things we're really excited about is, when the art team and programming team work together to solve a problem, one of them is using the vocabulary of fine art and the other is using the vocabulary of code. There's always this weird space between them, a magic place. It's where the language no longer works – you just have to keep playing with the system to find it.

BP *Retro City Rampage* as it is was entirely created from an accident. It was always going to be a satire, but originally I was creating something with a more serious tone, like *GTAIII*. When I was working on the jumps and the collisions, I had to handle what happened when one character landed on another – do they slide off, do they knock each other over? And I suddenly remembered stomping Goombas in *Super Mario*; I thought: 'Wouldn't it be funny to stomp pedestrians?' I was concerned that I'd alienate *GTA* fans, but I thought, 'I love comedy, I'm going to roll with this'. I always want to do things other people aren't doing. I don't want to keep reinventing the wheel – or rewriting string libraries!

JD Sometimes we might find a small bug or glitch that's not breaking the game, and that most players won't even notice. So we leave it there. They're like little Easter eggs – when a player finds them, they feel happy. It's a good thing. It's also important to think about the background of the gameworld, even the stuff that doesn't get into the game. We know everything about every character in *Botanicula*, even those with only a small role. We know who they are and how they got there. Then they're believable, and the players can feel it.

RH I agree. If you know the backstory of why something is in your game and you understand its function on a fundamental level within the world and with the other characters, then there is a quality to that continuity that you can really feel. It's important not just to add things because they're interesting, but to really think them through. That's when you know you've created your own universe. ■

The Edge Awards 2011

New hardware may have emerged in the shape of Wii U and PlayStation Vita during 2011, but it was also the year in which game studios were able to really push technical barriers on well-established hardware, and realise long-held ambitions. Nintendo found the perfect *Zelda* for motion control, Epic finished its gorgeous, gory fight with *Gears Of War 3*, and Naughty Dog hit its cinematic sweet spot once again in *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*.

It was a year of looking back, revising established systems and replanting them in pastures new. FromSoftware went boldly into an open world with its finely honed fantasy beast *Dark Souls*, *Battlefield 3* and *Modern Warfare 3* painted new levels of hyper-realism and Hollywood spectacle over FPS skeletons, and Bethesda made its biggest, best Choose Your Own Adventure yet with *Skyrim*.

It was also a year in which the digital space became a force to be reckoned with – take experiments such as *From Dust*, and the explosion of smartphone gaming on mature iOS and Android platforms.

Over the following pages, we honour 2011's biggest achievements, grandest ambitions and the best use of astral projection as a means to boost automobiles.

MAINSTREAM GAME OF THE YEAR

The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Format Wii **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house



There's nothing inevitable about the latest *Zelda* being this year's best game. Doing it all again wouldn't have been nearly enough, but *Skyward Sword* is about the unexpected. It re-engineers a formula that most players think they already know, and conjures surprise from ingredients both old and new. Initially, MotionPlus provides the novelty, and it's the finest example of motion-controlled gaming we've yet encountered. *Skyward Sword* is the greatest expression of Wii's promise; it's taken five years, but Nintendo has finally delivered such precision, consistency and fun that you soon barely think about it.

Instead, you enjoy *Skyward Sword*'s delicate remixing of classic *Zelda* structure. It recaptures a sense of mystery in its exquisitely designed dungeons and detailed overworlds, and familiar items turn up in the most unexpected of places. The game's backbone is the strongest-ever *Zelda* storyline, a tale of maturity, duty and love played out by characters who you delight in spending time with. Their scripts are deft and funny; their design and animation both weird and enchanting. And it's all drawn in pristine lines and rendered with a beautiful dappled graphical effect, blending technical skill and artistic vision. The result provides more reward and delight in its span than any other game this year.

RUNNERS-UP

Dark Souls
Format 360, PS3
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Never before has a fantasy RPG offered such contrasts, with cloud-splitting god beams and regal architecture above ground, and fetid sludge and poison-spewing basilisks beneath; frustration and pleasure; confusion and epiphany. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki constructs a world sprawling enough to feel boundless, yet dense and sculpted enough to be memorable. The damnable dying is simply Lordran's price of admission.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer In-house
Few terms are trotted out to market a game as readily as 'epic', but only to a few does the term truly apply. *Skyrim* is one. The size of its overworld thrills through sheer scale, but in the careful plotting of its mountain paths, the variety of frosty terrain types, and the crafted nature of its interiors, *Skyrim* offers more than scope: it offers a world worth exploring.

INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR

SpaceChem

Format Mac, PC **Publisher** Zachtronics Industries **Developer** In-house



SpaceChem is a lot like science, and therefore about experimentation and exploration. It's also much like programming, and thus logical and technical. And it's about design and invention, and so it's intensely creative and rewarding. In this puzzler, you synthesise chemicals by moving and manipulating atoms and compounds in circuits to produce molecules. Although its basis is in chemistry, ultimately your aim is to construct machines of your own invention: elegant and efficient systems that use as few components as possible and work as speedily as your wits allow.

The result is a game that pushes the potential of games to educate and entertain. For all its distancing jargon and brutal early learning curve, *SpaceChem* is thrillingly open-ended and player-centric; you reach each solution yourself, learning through trial and error, plus past experience. It's uncompromisingly respectful of you, never condescending to hold your hand when, with dedication, you can figure things out yourself. While it can be frustrating and even alienating, the payoff is the elation felt when you solve a puzzle well and look back over all you've learned. The rare and profound sense of satisfaction received transcends mere XP and achievements, because they're yours, and you earned them.

RUNNERS-UP

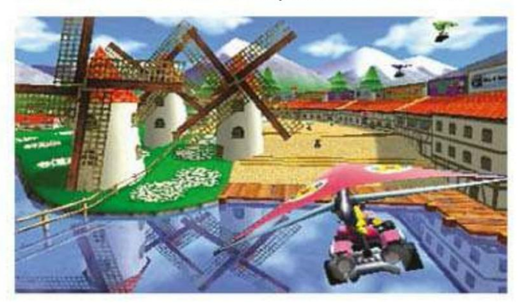
Bastion
Format 360, PC
Publisher Warner Bros
Developer Supergiant Games
Supergiant Games' debut turns the medium's dreary post-apocalyptic obsession on its head with vivid, painterly hues. The novel mechanic here – a gritty-voiced narrator recounting your deeds in real time – lends a sense of bard-song consequence to your actions, driving home Greg Kasavin's poignant tale of cyclical death and renewal. As people question games' suitability as a storytelling medium, *Bastion* offers a potent counter-argument.

Triple Town
Format Facebook
Publisher Spry Fox
Developer In-house
What do you get when you mix two parts *Bejeweled* with one part *Civilization*? Facebook's best game. Spry Fox's wickedly compulsive puzzler adds deep strategy to pattern matching; it's a fresh, clever combination that grips your brain like iron. We've not experienced a game as good at inveigling from us our Facebook Credits yet, let alone one that made spending them feel so worth it.

PORTABLE GAME OF THE YEAR

Mario Kart 7

Format 3DS **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo EAD/Retro Studios



Of Nintendo's three Q4 big-hitters, our most modest expectations were reserved for *Mario Kart 7*, a natural consequence of Nintendo spending the best part of 20 years iterating the series into the doldrums, diluting the original's balance and focus with each new item or gimmicky mechanic. Yet what we have here are the most intricately designed tracks in the series, filled with multiple routes over air, land and the sea floor somehow woven into a coherent whole, and power-ups that favour the slow yet still feel fair.

Online, the community feature deftly sidesteps the Friend Code system, with item filters meaning you can do away with the blue shell entirely, while rock-solid netcode means a stable 60fps even when playing those from across the globe.

It's a long-overdue return to form for the *Mario Kart* series and a ringing endorsement of its host platform. The 3D effect is subtle but startles, has no impact on framerate, and you'll miss it when it's turned off. It's everything the pre-release hype promised, and the launch lineup failed to deliver. Nintendo has taken a critical look into *Mario Kart*'s past, identified the faults and fixed them all, and in doing so has revitalised not just a flagging franchise but a handheld. If it applies the same methodology to its business as a whole, then its annual loss will surely be a one-off.

RUNNERS-UP

Super Mario 3D Land
Format 3DS
Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Super Mario 3D Land's first hours might be a prologue, but what a prologue they are – dismantling the components of 2D *Mario* and remaking them with the short, sweet and varied *Galaxy* spirit. But *3D Land* isn't overwhelmed by any of its influences, old or new. It stands confidently as a new type of *Mario* for still-new hardware, and proves that space wasn't the only place left to go, after all.

Jetpack Joyride
Format iOS
Publisher Halfbrick
Developer In-house
There's a beautiful immediacy to Halfbrick's *Jetpack Joyride*. Tap the screen to begin and everyman Barry Steakfries crashes through the wall of a secret laboratory, heists an experimental jetpack, and then tries to log as much distance as he can before crashing. It's amazing how robust the experience feels given that navigation involves nothing more than a simple touch anywhere on the screen.

BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Dark Souls

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** Namco Bandai **Developer** From Software



Dark Souls profoundly understands online play's defining feature: humanity. Though there's an in-game mechanic that shares the name (a typically deft touch, blending concept and lore), the focus is always on others. *Dark Souls*' multiplayer runs alongside its singleplayer, but not always in parallel: asynchronous messages left for you offer hints or tricks, while bloodstains and ghosts flicker in and out of reality. The key is its tightly controlled feature set: with no voicechat and no friends, this lonely world is kept permanently lonely.

The summoning signs of other players can come in a rash or not at all, and then there's the terror of invasion. Whenever in human form, the threat of an invading player is the sword of Damocles. At just the wrong moments, the thread snaps. Invaders blend in like chameleons, set traps, lie in wait for ages and kill you in seconds. Covenants take things further: gangs of justice-seeking avengers, mercenary killers, or just dedicated to certain locations.

Fleeting ghosts, warnings burned into the floor, and crimson death are *Dark Souls*' online manifestations, but its true magic lies in humanity: those mischief-makers, roleplayers, heroes and villains. It's not quite a deathmatch, but sometimes the description seems to fit perfectly.

RUNNERS-UP

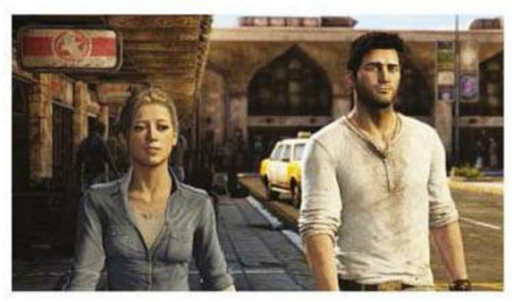
Portal 2
Format 360, Mac, PC, PS3
Publisher EA/Valve
Developer Valve
With an extra pair of portals allowing for more challenging puzzles, *Portal 2*'s co-op was always going to be good. What we didn't expect was for it to be so painless. The ping tool neatly dodges "No, *that* wall" moments, and the hub level is a neat restructuring of the linear singleplayer. The gestures might seem superfluous, but are essential for making it up to your ally when you fling them into a wall.

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Activision
Developer Infinity Ward/ Sledgehammer Games
With a much-improved Spec Ops mode, the Survival game type and four map packs promised, this is the series' most generous offering to date, but the principal addition is Elite. Reviewing recent matches and tweaking classes from the comfort of our desks has only deepened our connection with the most immediately rewarding online shooter around.

BEST VISUAL DESIGN

Uncharted 3

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog



With *Uncharted*, visual design isn't just about details such as Nathan Drake's twisting clothing, smudged, scratched skin and charming, twinkly eyes. Nor is it about the ripple of sand dunes collapsing naturalistically beneath his feet. The sumptuous, multicoloured finery of a Middle Eastern bazaar – with its tourist trinkets, local food, and bright swathes of fabric all on sale – and the dilapidated beauty of a crumbling, overgrown château can only communicate part of *Uncharted 3*'s visual appeal, too.

Instead Naughty Dog's latest epic is about all these things together in a single game and more besides. Because as well as detail, this is a developer that understands scale – the camera pulling back to reveal that Drake's been swallowed up by those flowing sands, or artfully framing scenes to reveal hazy horizons and bright, sparkling city views. There's stylisation here, for sure, and formidable technical skills are at work, too. But, wherever you are, there's also a sense of authenticity that can only reflect hours of painstaking research. *Uncharted* is a series that's been built upon the thrill of discovery, and Naughty Dog continues to ensure that no matter how far Drake travels, on both a small scale and a large one, his and the player's reward is always something beautiful to witness.

RUNNERS-UP

Battlefield 3
Format PC
Publisher EA
Developer DICE
Talking simply in terms of visual fidelity, PC *Battlefield 3* proves DICE is among the industry's most formidable technologists. However, the game isn't just a showcase for the engine's ability to assiduously ape reality. Take a moment to observe the way that light fragments into defocused glitter, or that windswept surface water sheers and ripples, and you'll soon realise that this is the cutting edge being wielded with an acute aesthetic sense.

Child Of Eden
Format 360, PS3
Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Q Entertainment
Polygon poetry in motion, Tetsuya Mizuguchi's opus takes in all the sights and sounds of his career – from the sparkling colour spectrum of *Every Extend Extra* to the wireframes of *Rez* – and weaves them into a dazzling, coherent whole. Whether explored using a controller or via motion control, from the sea to the stars, *Eden* is a place to revel in and worship as the thumping beats go on.

BEST AUDIO DESIGN

Portal 2

Format 360, Mac, PC, PS3 **Publisher** EA/Valve **Developer** Valve



Some might have found the Bristolian burr an annoyance, but the casting of Stephen Merchant as Chell's idiotic robot sidekick, Wheatley – along with a garrulous JK Simmons as late Aperture Science CEO Cave Johnson – meant *Portal*'s transition from blackly comic thriller to full sci-fi comedy was assured. But even when it's playing things straight, every audio aspect of Valve's title astounds: the clanking rattle and groaning metal of Aperture Science's abandoned innards conveys an almost disturbing sense of isolation and scale, while the infinite, pneumatic rhythm of a hundred weighted storage cubes flowing through a giant glass tube convinces you that you're trapped in a giant, self-perpetuating machine. And while we might have expected a Coulton-written single for the credits, the Turret Opera preceding them was another Baroque flourish.

Yet *Portal 2*'s real audio achievement isn't in these touches, but hidden in the puzzles at its heart. An adaptive music system gives each puzzle tool – the lasers, the gels, the plates, the cubes – its own musical beat, and turns the crafting of a solution into an act of composition. And when you slide, bounce and fling yourself to a room's exit, and all the musical cues come together, it sounds like nothing less than a performance.

RUNNERS-UP

The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword
Format Wii
Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
We defy you not to feel a swell of emotion at *Skyward Sword*'s grand theme, which opens with delicate harp and triumphantly ends with a full orchestra. But it's just one of the game's vast number of distinctive melodies and styles, from lilting ballads to percussive electronica, many with multiple dynamic layers that respond to the action. *Skyward Sword*'s scope has a score to match.

Dark Souls
Format 360, PS3
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Sparsely populated with clinking armour, crackling torches and sombre vocal performances that provocatively teeter on just the right side of hammy, FromSoftware's soundtrack is powerfully alluring. Clipped, metallic and dissonant, it acts almost like another enemy to overcome, sapping your humanity and leaving you feeling as hollow as the character you're playing.

PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR

Nintendo

Key Games *Super Mario Land 3D, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*



Dismissing Nintendo's efforts over the past year would be easy. Take its disdain for App Store-like prices in its eShop and DSi Shop, for instance, which sees games that are released for a mere 69p on other platforms costing five times as much. And the games that Nintendo has released, as superlative as many have been, have been agonisingly mistimed. The 3DS launch lineup had to rely on the relatively flimsy charms of *Nintendogs + Cats* and *Pilotwings Resort* as its flagships, so it wasn't until the end of the year's *Super Mario 3D Land, Mario Kart 7* and *Ocarina Of Time 3D* that the handheld finally found the broad relevancy and buzz it needs.

Similarly, as Wii enters its twilight period, having enjoyed so few marquee Nintendo releases in the past couple of years, it was only late in 2011 that Nintendo released *The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword,* prompting thousands of Internet commenters to "dust off" their consoles in anticipation. But though the games may be late, what games they are. Each one is polished to perfection, reflecting Nintendo's attitude to quality and value, as well as its respect for its fanbase. Such an exemplary approach to game-making is something to which other publishers, many of which are apparently happy to put out rushed products in order to hit launch windows, can only look up.

RUNNERS-UP

Ubisoft

Key games *Assassin's Creed Revelations, Child Of Eden, Rayman Origins, Driver San Francisco, From Dust*

Old Ezio might be getting severely creaky, but Ubisoft's keen eye for a marketing campaign almost let him off. Other key releases emphasised its inspiringly catholic tastes – New Age toy *From Dust*, the happy clappy *Child Of Eden* and *Rayman Origins'* HD upgrade of the platformer – while its faith in *Driver*, when everyone else had given up on it, resulted in the best driving game since *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*.

Bethesda Softworks

Key games *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Brink, Rage*

In a world of publishers running after gaming's rapidly expanding borders or releasing me-too FPSes, Bethesda stands proud with a roster of distinctive, concept-rich games that make gamers care. *Brink*'s concept may have surpassed its execution and it was a pity that *Rage*'s pioneering tech didn't extend to its design, but *Skyrim*'s success is testament to an old-school attitude paying off.

STUDIO OF THE YEAR

Eidos Montreal

Key Game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*



Making a sequel to the beloved *Deus Ex* would have been a daunting task for any studio. But doing so as a newly established team, recruiting as you go, would have been – well, only Eidos Montreal could tell you how that felt. And yet its fine updating of *Deus Ex* in the form of *Human Revolution* manages to capture the original's heady mix of player choice, firstperson action and character development while adding flavours entirely of its own. There's *Human Revolution*'s distinctive visual design, which melds filigreed Baroque with metallic high technology, and its reams of carefully layered backstory, detail and side missions, which tell tales of discrimination and corporate irresponsibility in a richly realised world.

Bearing in mind the pressures that bore down on production, some of *Human Revolution*'s weaker moments – principally its poor boss fights – become more understandable, if not wholly excusable. The game's numerous successes, however, exhibit more maturity, inspiration and skill than many established studios will ever achieve, while also demonstrating how the right creative team can work wonders when up against it. We have a feeling that the upcoming *Thief 4* – another update of a much-loved Ion Storm series – is in good hands.

RUNNERS-UP

Mojang

Key game *Minecraft*

Don't let *Minecraft* reaching its official release fool you – it'll never be finished, with each patch adding more potential to the blocky creative sandpit. That's what Mojang trades on, using intimate knowledge of its vast fanbase to inform every decision, while never being afraid to go against the grain. Rich but thoroughly indie, powerful while accessible, if Mojang's work represents the future of developers, players have a lot to look forward to.

Firemint

Key games *Spy Mouse, Real Racing 2 HD*

Firemint is iOS's most exciting developer, and not because of a burgeoning release roster, but because it treats its relatively small selection of games with the utmost pride and care and applies to them the finest technology. *Spy Mouse*'s exquisite animation and *Real Racing 2 HD*'s console-rivalling 3D push Firemint ahead of the field, while the studio's pioneering use of AirPlay Mirroring for 1080p TV output keeps it there.

The *alternative* Edge Awards 2011

Plaudits and wrist slaps for some of the more esoteric aspects of gaming this year

MOST CONTEXT-INSENSITIVE

Homefront

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Kaos Studios



Context-sensitive commands are gaming's flexible friend, used for everything from opening valves to placing explosive charges. And, during the emotionally charged discovery of a North Korean atrocity in *Homefront*, to 'Jump in mass grave'.

MOST CREATIVELY TORTURED EXEC

Danny Bilson

Role Executive VP of core games, THQ



When *Homefront* debuted to muted reviews, THQ's executive vice president of core games, **Danny Bilson**, scorned its Metacritic score by saying "the game is not a 71". He went on to add: "You can't apply math to art." Enlightened indeed.

MOST VILLAINOUS CAST

Batman: Arkham City

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Warner Bros **Developer** Rocksteady



Heroes need villains, but does Bats really require quite so many packed into one deranged township? We understand that picking favourites from such a well-stocked rogues gallery is a challenge, but save at least some for the next game, hmm?

MOST EFFECTIVE SURGICAL PROCEDURE

Dead Space 2

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** EA **Developer** Visceral Games



For a game that's all about gruesome, transformative body horror, it's a very precise moment of gore that sticks out of *Dead Space 2*. Or rather sticks in, like a great big player-controlled needle straight through Isaac Clarke's eye.

BEST LOCALISATION

Xenoblade Chronicles

Format Wii **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft



That one of the year's best RPGs didn't reach US shores is North America's loss and the UK's gain. *Xenoblade* is blessed with a localisation that actually sounds local, with pitch-perfect English accents and even a Chuckle Brothers reference.

MOST LIKELY TO GIVE YOU AN EARWORM

Saints Row The Third

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Volition Inc



An endgame set to Bonnie Tyler's Holding Out For A Hero on infinite loop was a masterstroke that stayed with us for days afterwards, our every waking moment reminding us that we had to be strong, fast and fresh from the fight.

FURTHEST THROWBACK

Duke Nukem Forever

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Gearbox Software



Duke's return showed every bit of its long development history, from internet memes so old they'd come back around to ancient game design conventions that thankfully hadn't. It's still probably best left as an archaeological artefact, though.

THE RARE AWARD

Vanillite

Format DS **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Game Freak

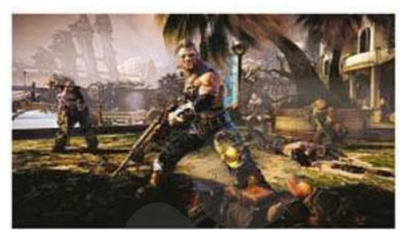


Rare used to specialise in applying googly eyes to anything to create charming, memorable characters, so it was great to see Game Freak tap the technique's nuances for *Pokémon Black/White* with... Er. Hmm. It looked like an ice cream or something.

FOULEST MOUTH

Bulletstorm

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** EA **Developer** People Can Fly/Epic



There are games that detract and disturb with their crude comedy bent, and then there's *Bulletstorm* – a barrage of bad language with a penchant for dick jokes. Here, People Can Fly wears its jockish juvenility on its bicep-stretched sleeve.

MOST EFFECTIVE YET RIDICULOUS CONCEIT

Driver San Francisco

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Reflections



How do you give players the keys to city without compromising your narrative? Well, how about giving your protagonist the ability to astral project all over town? It sounds silly, it *is* silly, and yet, to Reflections' credit, it works.

CREAKIEST ENGINE MASQUERADING AS NEW

Skyrim's 'Creation'

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** In-house



All the frosty weather effects are lovely, but what in the name of the Elder Scrolls could Bethesda be trying to hide beneath all that snow? It's not the Gamebryo engine, is it? We think it might be – we'd know those glitches anywhere.

MOST INVADED HOMELAND OF THE YEAR

United States Of America

Key games *Modern Warfare 3, Homefront, Resistance 3*



Whether you were a Chimera, North Korean or an ultranationalist Russian, the US was the place to be this year. The land of the free was the land of the killing spree and nowhere was safe. Homeland Security should be ashamed.

MOST AGGRESSIVE SCEPTICISM

LA Noire

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** Rockstar **Developer** Team Bondi, Rockstar



The 'Doubt' option in *LA Noire* was originally meant to read 'Force'. With that in mind, replay the game and marvel as Cole Phelps transforms from a worryingly unstable officer of the law into one with a scarily convincing 'bad cop' routine.

MOST STYLISH VERSION OF AN OBSCURE SOURCE

El Shaddai

Format 360, PS3 **Publisher** UTV Ignition Ent. **Developer** In-house



It may be over 2,000 years old, but all the Book Of Enoch (a bit of 'blasphemous' Biblical apocrypha) needed was a little sprucing up from our favourite art director – *Okami*'s Takeyasu Sawaki. Now, let's see if it gets reinstated.

THE DEEPEST POCKETS IN GAMING

EA

Non-GAAP net revenue Q2 FY12 $1,034 million



This year, EA continued its acquisition of preeminent mobile developers with Firemint and PopCap. Both were shrewd buys – but then shrewdness comes cheap when you've got all those millions lying around in the first place.



THE NAMCO BANDAI STORY

Hungry. The word applies to Namco's legendary dot-munching maestro – who celebrated his 30th anniversary in 2010. But it's just as apt a description of the company that introduced Pac-Man to the world. In our interview with Namco Bandai's president and CEO Shukuo Ishikawa (p103) in the pages to come, he shares his belief that those in the industry should "aim for the world", and that's precisely what Namco did in 2005 when it merged with Japan's most successful toy company, Bandai. Bandai's powerful stable of IP and Namco's ability to create memorable game content were a perfect marriage. We visit the company's Tokyo headquarters and talk to the studio heads behind Namco's biggest franchises – *Tekken* (p110), *Soul Calibur* (p113), *Ace Combat* (p112) and more – about what each team is doing to push its respective games forward and secure a global audience. We also pay a visit to *Dark Souls* (p108) developer FromSoftware, one of Namco Bandai's most promising external developers. Plus, the trip wouldn't be complete if we didn't revel in one of Namco's legendary arcades (p114). There's lots to come. Hopefully you've worked up an appetite.

Dreams, Fun and *Inspiration*: Namco Bandai's slogan stands in brazenly cheerful opposition to the struggles Japan has endured following the earthquake of March 2011 and the economic uncertainty hanging over global markets. It would be easy to regard the entertainment industry as superfluous during such times of hardship and crisis, but Namco Bandai was uniquely positioned to offer a bit of joy, which has its own medicinal properties. **Ryuichiro Baba** – the series producer for Japanese arcade favourite *Gundam Extreme Vs* – had forecast a 30 per cent drop in revenue due to the earthquake and the rolling blackouts that followed. He was surprised when profits actually jumped 15 per cent in April once things settled down. "After such a disaster, people are going to the arcades because they'd been staying at home and they were ready to have a little bit of entertainment," Baba says. "And that really is an important part of the recovery for Japan."

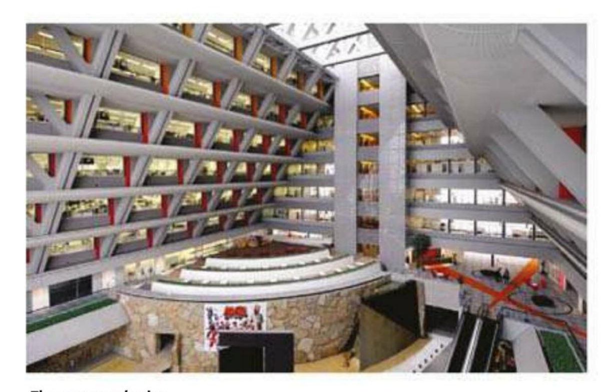
The arcade occupies a pivotal role in the rise of Namco's side of the business. The company got its start in 1955 as Nakamura Manufacturing, after building an installation of wooden horse amusement rides atop a Tokyo department store. In 1974, Namco acquired Atari Japan and entered the videogame business in earnest. Four short years later, the company launched *Pac-Man*, which would became an entertainment phenomenon the world over.







From iconic games such as *Pac-Man* to thriving amusement facilities to toys, Namco Bandai has interests in a dizzying variety of entertainment



The company's airy new Tokyo office space (above) was formerly occupied by Panasonic. *Gundam* (below) has become Japan's top arcade franchise



Though the arcade scene has diminished in the west, it remains a vital part of the company's business at home in Japan. Namco Bandai's current president and CEO **Shukuo Ishikawa** came up through the arcade division, working in both sales and content development. And in April of 2011, senior executive officer **Shinichiro Aiki**, formerly head of the company's successful arcade division, was moved into a position overseeing content development for the entire Namco label. Aiki sees Namco Bandai's dominance in the arcade as one of the company's key competitive advantages in Japan: "We have direct contact with consumers, especially through our arcade business, and that's very rare in the game industry."

Namco has become much more than just a game company. Its merger in 2005 with Japan's largest toy manufacturer Bandai created an entertainment juggernaut across a host of channels – games, toys, mobile, themed amusement facilities, even DVD and Blu-ray products. Establishing such a dominant position in the Japanese entertainment market has given Namco Bandai a sturdy base from which to extend its influence to western markets and become a worldwide player.

In July of 2009, Namco Bandai made a bold investment in its western business by acquiring Atari's entire European distribution arm. The new entity, Namco Bandai Partners, gave the company 17 offices across the UK, Europe, Asia and Australia. "That was quite exciting," says **John Galloway**, vice president of Namco Bandai's Northern and Benelux region. "It's the birth of Namco Bandai in Europe as a full-fledged company within the game industry. And you don't get a lot of them setting up at the moment."



Namco Bandai Partners is a nimble organisation with the ability to not only market and release firstparty titles such as *Ace Combat: Assault Horizon* and the upcoming *Soul Calibur V* (see p60) but also go out and sign thirdparty deals with other publishers to distribute content where it doesn't have offices set up. "We have the ability to take on everybody to a degree," says **Lee Kirton**, Namco Partners UK's marketing director, "because we have offices in every country and a way through to retail." The central European office in Lyon – formerly belonging to Bandai Networks – now serves as the hub of communication uniting the American and European arms of the business.

With a powerful stable of IP at its disposal across every sector of the entertainment landscape, a robust global infrastructure, a forward-looking joint venture with DeNA to release social and mobile games for smartphones and tablets, and an unshakable base in the Japanese market, the company's short- and long-term prospects look extremely promising. ■

BOSS ENCOUNTER

An audience with the man guiding Namco Bandai forward

When Namco Bandai president and CEO **Shukuo Ishikawa** joined Namco in 1978, the era of the home console was still several years off, and concepts such as the smartphone and cloud gaming would've sounded positively sci-fi. As he moved from sales of arcade machines into managing the arcade development division, he even had a hand in developing the hit game *WaniWani Panic,* in which you swat plastic crocodiles with a mallet as they poke their heads out. His blend of marketing savvy and development creativity have taken him a long way in the company. He assumed his current post in April 2009 and has ambitious plans for making Namco Bandai a global leader in entertainment.

What is Namco Bandai doing to realise the untapped potential of the entertainment industry?
Our products are not everyday necessities, and I believe that's the number one possibility. They're entertainment products, and so if people come to like it, there's a high chance they'll become involved in these products. There's a large opportunity out there in selling products to people who will really love them.

When I was making games, I was making games targeted towards a juvenile audience, or centred on children, but now we are able to make games targeting a wide variety of audiences. One of our strengths here at Bandai Namco Group is that we can leverage many IPs. If you take Gundam, for example, we can have two generations, a father and child, able to play together within one IP.



Shukuo Ishikawa, president and CEO, Namco Bandai

What was the incentive behind the management integration of Namco and Bandai?
We believe that those in the entertainment industry should aim for the world, and so we did the management integration. We combined the marketing ability to bring out the best of Bandai's characters with Namco's ability to make great games.

Why do you feel that the company's gaming efforts to date haven't met with greater success abroad?
We are trying various approaches, but one of our recent realisations is that we were attempting to imitate what publishers like EA or Activision have been doing, and we believe this is a very big mistake. We have to get back to our strengths at Bandai Namco Group – particularly Bandai Namco Games – and our own unique fighting style, otherwise we will never win against massive forces such as EA. Thus we believe our activities up until now were a mistake, and are currently changing our approach.



The videogame landscape is changing drastically. What adjustments is the company making to address this?
We greatly changed our way of thinking two years ago. Before then, projects started from our platform division, arcade division or mobile division, and development, production and retail were carried out per division. Two years ago, we shifted our thinking. For example, in the case of *Tekken,* we'd now consider how to develop the IP across each one of these available channels. We are aiming to reach maximum profits per IP, and therefore one producer and one team are approaching their title while considering retail, digital, DLC and other sources of revenue. Therefore, one team is responsible for considering all aspects.

In the future, what is the greatest challenge facing Namco Bandai?
Our international share is still small. For Bandai's toy and hobby group, we're number one in Japan but have only half a per cent of share in America. Our largest obstacle is how to develop internationally. I believe that if we put effort into it, the videogame business will grow very large, and therefore I believe that is where we should put our efforts.

THE HIGH FIVE

Project leads on Namco's key franchises talk development, disaster and global appeal



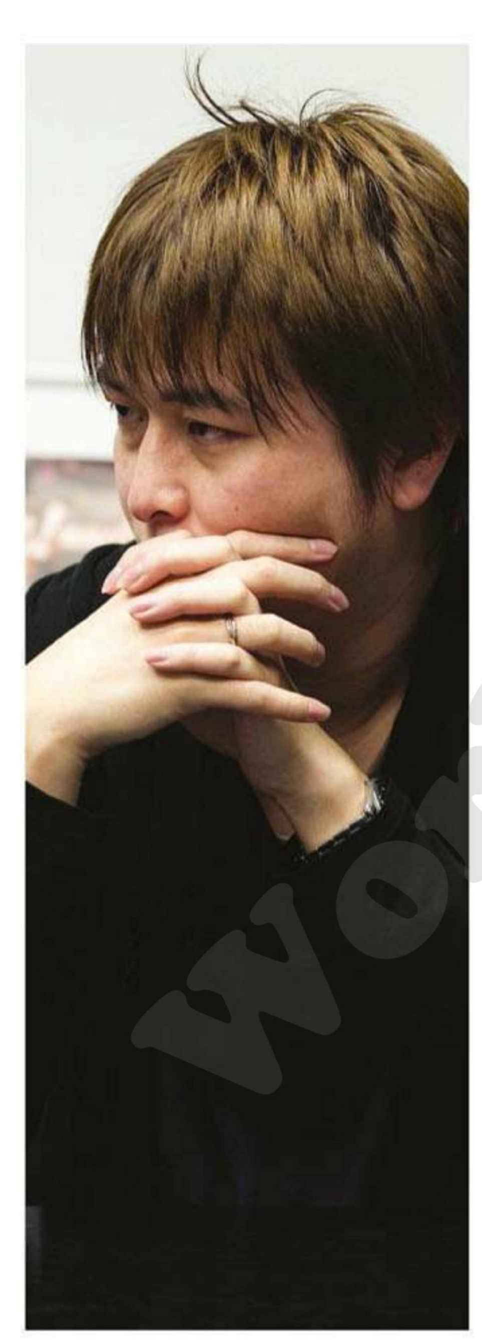
Hideo Baba, *Tales* series producer



Katsuhiro Harada, *Tekken* series director



Ryuichiro Baba, *Gundam Extreme Vs* chief producer



Daishi Odashima, *Soul Calibur* game director



Kazutoki Kono, *Ace Combat* producer and executive director

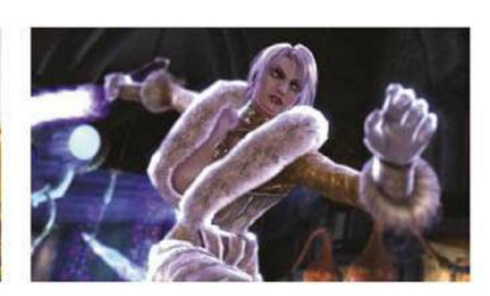
From our meeting room on the first-floor mezzanine of Namco Bandai's Tokyo headquarters, you can hear the sound of a waterfall spilling into a shallow indoor moat. The waterfall itself may be artificially constructed, but the emotional response is no less real – the mere sound of it transports you outside of the urban bustle of Tokyo and into nature. All five of the Namco project leads at today's roundtable have spent their careers perfecting the art of transporting audiences. Joining us are *Tekken* series director **Katsuhiro Harada**, *Gundam Extreme Vs* chief producer **Ryuichiro Baba**, *Soul Calibur* game director **Daishi Odashima**, *Tales* series producer **Hideo Baba**, and *Ace Combat*'s producer and executive director **Kazutoki Kono**. We discuss the role entertainment can play in Japan's recovery from natural disaster, the challenges of designing for a global audience, and the benefits of working for one of Japan's most prestigious publishers.

How much consideration do you give to the tastes of audiences in markets outside of Japan when developing your games?

RB I see development on two vectors. One is the IP side of it and the other is the actual gameplay mechanics. For example, as you might know, *Gundam* is very strong in Japan but not at all in the US or Europe. But taking the two, if the gameplay is interesting, then perhaps you could appeal to gamers overseas. But in Japan, because the *Gundam* IP is so strong, you can use it for the arcade or mobile games







Namco Bandai is looking to make key franchises such as *Ace Combat*, *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur* even larger properties in the future



or console or whatever. Japanese gamers will give it a chance because it's something they're interested in. But then if the gameplay does interest people abroad, then both vectors are accounted for.

DO I often receive comments from fans abroad that *Calibur* seems to be geared toward a Japanese audience, and also the opposite comment from Japanese fans – that it seems to be geared for fans abroad. But the reality is that it's neither. Our development team focuses on creating a game that we think is interesting and will engage players. If we get the core mechanics down and they're appealing, it doesn't really have to be Japanese or western.

KK Regarding *Ace Combat*, we haven't arrived at an answer to that problem yet. I'm still trying to figure out what exactly western gamers want in a Japanese-built game, as such. One of the methods we've taken in *Assault Horizon*, for example, is to introduce non-Japanese staff into the development team and try to implement some of the gameplay features they've proposed that might appeal to western audiences. And as the game was nearing completion and about to be on sale, we were starting to get some feedback on whether our ideas were accurate or not, but we still don't have a really good idea yet. But we'll need another instalment in order to fully test out some of the theories we have about the design principles of western games.

KH It's probably impossible to achieve a perfect balance regarding gameplay mechanics, something that would be perfect for the west or Japan or both. Of course, as far as *Tekken* is concerned, we do try to include game elements that would appeal to western gamers – for example, a character from Spain or a stage from Germany that might keep those various countries interested. But that's not one of the core gameplay mechanics, so I don't feel there is a perfect balance that you can achieve.

DO You really have to have a strong passion about what direction you want to take your game in. Although it's important to listen to people's opinions, you have to feel strongly about what you want to do with it.

"I'm still trying to figure out what exactly western gamers want in a Japanese-built game"

HB It's very difficult. I've been doing a lot of interviews with overseas people regarding the *Tales* games. And a lot of people will ask me: "Why does a 17- or 18-year-old youngster try to save the world? That would be impossible". But in Japan that's something that would be understandable because the development team tries to determine how a youngster who gets into a problem in the game would overcome it within their society. Then they try to put that in the game. But overseas, this really macho, really mature person tries to save the world, and that's more legitimate to them. But that's not really appealing to the Japanese audience.

Does your association with Namco affect the philosophy of your game design or influence the direction in which you're guiding your respective IPs?

KH To me, everyone is an adversary. Not on a negative level, but obviously since we have a huge company, you have all these creative, talented people. Each team wants to have the most talented people working on their project as much as possible, the largest budget, etc. Everything is about trying to grab resources. Of course I'm very intense when it comes to that aspect of it. And that shows up in the development team around *Tekken* as well because that influence has rubbed off on them. It's not that they're given some task or some work to do and they do it. Everyone involved goes after what they're interested in and what they want to work on, and they make it their work.

KK As far as the Project Aces team goes, we're very quiet and serious. Basically, we do our work. [Laughter.]

Beyond that friendly competition, is there much room for co-operation between Namco's internal studios?

KH I have a lot of relationships and freedom in terms of what resources and staff to use, and I do consult with Baba-san from the *Gundam* project and Odashima-san from *Calibur*, discussing the overall strategy concerning our respective franchises.

KK In terms of realtime demos, for instance, *Soul Calibur*, *Tekken* and Project Aces have shared technology a little bit recently.

KH There's a programming library that we all use, but each team customises the libraries to suit

their own purposes. There's also a lot of back-and-forth between the visual artists on each project and the tools and resources that they use. Between the *Gundam* and *Tekken* teams, there's also a lot of co-operation in regard to the networking technology involved. *Gundam* also uses the Tekken.Net that was designed for the *Tekken* arcade machines. And obviously the team that's working on it for their latest instalment, they upgrade it and share those upgrades with the other team.



How did the devastation of the earthquake affect the studios on a personal level, and in terms of development?

HB One month after the earthquake, the *Tales Of The Abyss* 3DS version was scheduled for release in Japan. But the earthquake had a great impact on the schedule, of course, and adjusting was very difficult. Even though in Tokyo the damage wasn't so big, a lot of staff members' relatives live where the earthquake occurred, so that kind of mental care was really important.

KK For the *Ace Combat* team, we were working on the day of the earthquake, so when the actual earthquake occurred, everyone was panicky. But after the earthquake, since we didn't have any direct damage in Tokyo, the team came together and said, "A lot of people are waiting for our game so we have to release it on the day we've promised". And we actually did that without any problem. The earthquake was a catalyst to get the staff members' souls together a bit more. Especially with Facebook, a lot of fans were communicating with the Project Aces team and were worried about whether the game and the development team were OK. And those kinds of comments really helped us.

KH It was very easy to see how Japan was affected, because the arcades in Japan are connected by the Tekken.Net. So when the earthquake hit and the tsunami right after, you could see all of these locations just completely go offline as a result. And that was really quite shocking, and it impressed the matter on my conscience at that point. So it was really shocking to see that immediate effect. But like Kono-san said, the outpouring from fans worldwide was overwhelming. It was kind of surprising to a lot of Japanese game developers because, after experiencing such tragedy, we kind of felt like we're not necessary. We're making games, which are a form of entertainment, which at that point really isn't relevant. But we felt from the outpouring of the fans that there are a lot of people looking forward to what we're doing, and it is important.

DO Right after the earthquake hit, there were some tremors. The *Soul Calibur* staff were quite worried and everyone was going home quite early, which had an impact on the development schedule, obviously. I'd estimate that a month or so was lost just because of that, in addition to the rolling blackouts and loss of power that occurred afterward. So it's been a challenge to get back on schedule.

RB Regarding *Gundam*, we were working on a console port at the time. But we experienced many of the things others have mentioned, such as noticing all the arcades going offline in the region that was hit hard. Not to mention the loss of income for the arcades. We got that data, and noticed that there was a considerable drop-off. Because of the earthquake and the rolling blackouts, it's obviously going to go down, so we expected profits to decrease by maybe 30 per cent. But in April, when things settled down a little bit, a lot of people showed up in the arcades and we actually saw a jump in income of maybe 15 per cent. What this shows is that after such a disaster, people are going to the arcades because they'd been staying at home and they were ready to have a little bit of entertainment. And that really is an important part of the recovery for Japan. ■

DARK ARTS

FromSoftware released one of the best RPGs of 2011 – and there's more to come

Even though Namco Bandai has a variety of accomplished internal studios, a key part of the company's content strategy involves nurturing relationships with thirdparty developers. The success of critically acclaimed action-RPG *Dark Souls* – released on the Bandai label – cements FromSoftware's status as a key partner for the future. We sit down with *Dark Souls* producer and director **Hidetaka Miyazaki**, *Armored Core V* producer and director **Toshifumi Nabeshima**, and the visual design director for both games, **Daisuke Satake**, to discuss these projects. **Daisuke Uchiyama** – the Namco Bandai producer responsible for liaising with the studio – even has some questions of his own.


Hidetaka Miyazaki


Toshifumi Nabeshima


Daisuke Satake


Daisuke Uchiyama

How much did having the existing template of *Demon's Souls* help ease the development burden of *Dark Souls*?

HM There were definitely many areas in *Dark Souls'* production that were made easier due to *Demon's Souls*, but on the other hand, there were many areas that were pulling us back and were quite difficult to handle, so overall it wasn't all that easy. Therefore, no, *Dark* was not actually easier to create due to *Demon's*. We experimented a lot with the system, and also removed the server. On the surface they may seem to be similar, but we put a lot of effort into the content, so it was rather difficult.

What does it feel like as a designer to be called 'cruel' and 'sadistic'?

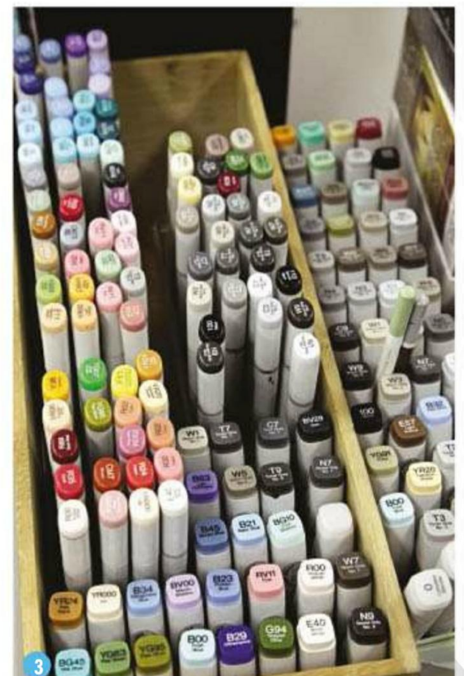
HM If I had to say for myself, I'm more masochistic than sadistic, so I created this while thinking what I would like to happen to me. I don't think anyone will believe me.
DU I don't believe you. I've never seen someone who is this sadistic. It's weird that you're calling yourself masochistic. How do you bring your ideas – such as your world concepts of the Blighttown and Depths – to the designers?
HM For the most part, I directly communicate with each designer. In terms of the design work, I really wanted refined work, so I asked all the designers not to design anything indecent. For example, I consider anything grotesque or full of blood to be indecent, so I told them to stay away from it. Therefore, we've made everything, even the evil village, with refined finishing touches. We collectively do not believe that anything disgusting will work, and that's how we approached our designs.
DU What's that? Your wife plays *Dark Souls*, Nabeshima?
TN Yes, I got yelled at because it was too difficult. I go to sleep before her, and when I wake up she's still playing, muttering under her breath.
HM However, regardless of going overboard with the stacking of the curse, we believe we did a fairly good job of turning the player's gameplay into the story. When I look at where and how much users are struggling, I believe we did a good job after all. However, whether the balance is actually good or not is a different story.
DU I have something to say about that death by falling off the edge of the cathedral in Anor Londo. I thought I would die from the arrow, but I died from falling! Who designed that?
HM I think I was the one who placed that obstacle. I wanted to place some obstacles that people would remember and talk about. But if you hit that character with a poison arrow, they will die if it isn't treated. Including these kinds of cheap strategies, I want people to have fun with strategising. I want the game to be memorable. I want specific things that when you think back on the game, you'll remember – like that moment with the archer.
DU Satake is a designer for both *Armored Core V* and *Dark Souls*, but the design systems are completely different from one another. How do you approach this, Satake?
DS On the surface, our games' worlds are different, but our aims for these games are actually connected. I design while considering which direction to take for each title.
DU So, does that mean that the *Armored Core* and *Dark Souls'* designs are actually unified somewhere in the back?
DS Through experimentation, we are aiming to create a place somewhere in people's lives. In that sense, the two games have something in common. However, if I don't switch design styles I get yelled at often.

What does *Armored Core V* bring to the *AC* series?

TN It's still an action game at its core. That hasn't changed. We've struggled in the past to make action games that were simple to play but included battles that hardcore gamers could enjoy. This time we used that as our base, and made many new additions to *AC* such as vying for in-game territory through team-based online combat. ■

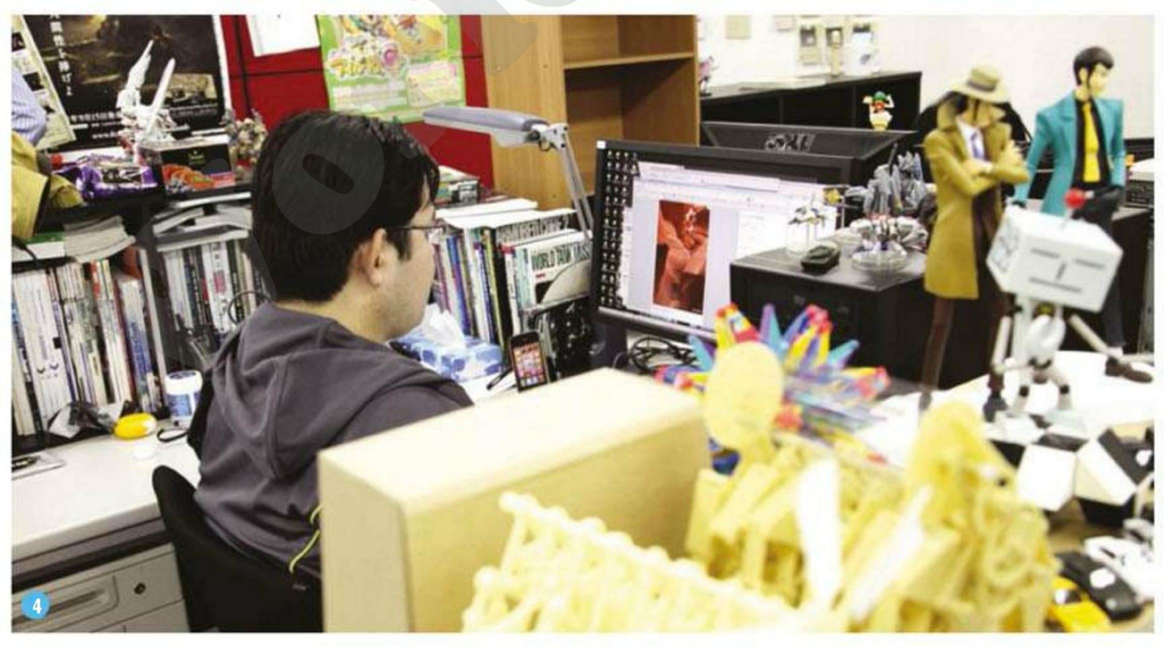












INSIDE FROMSOFTWARE

1 A coder works on a final *Dark Souls* patch. 2 The music and sound effects department is located on the basement level. 3 Not all design requires a computer. 4 The studio's art department is surprisingly small, given the expansive visual scope of its games. 5 *Dark Souls* boss Seath the Scaleless helps to showcase From's artistic vision. 6 *Armored Core V* launches in 2012

FIGHT CLUB

Tekken aims to expand the fighting game market with a bold new collaboration

Since its initial arcade debut in 1994, *Tekken* has been a standard-bearer for the Namco label. The stylish fighting franchise boasts lifetime sales of 40 million units and has pushed 3D graphics technology relentlessly forward. We visit its studio in Namco Bandai's Tokyo headquarters to sit down with series director **Katsuhiro Harada**, character designer **Toshiteru Ogata**, drawing programmer **Yoshiki Domae** and game director **Yuichi Yonemori** to discuss the studio's exciting new collaboration with Capcom, due in 2012.

With *Street Fighter X Tekken*, is it difficult to relinquish control over characters that you've spent so many years developing?
KH I see this only as a positive development. Both Capcom and the Namco staff, we have a mutual respect for each other. Since we created the *Tekken* characters, if I mentioned that a character should be done this way or that, obviously they would not really think too much about it and heed my concerns, which might not always be a good thing because that could stifle their creativity. So they have a lot of freedom creatively to do what they please, and that's a positive thing.
YY As a result, Capcom might come up with some new ways of showing our characters that appeal to gamers, that we might not have thought of. And, at the risk of sounding cocky, the same might be true of us with the *Street Fighter* characters when it's our turn.
YD Of course the game program is drastically different – the shaders involved – so the look of the characters, as you can see, is quite different. But I find it very interesting what they've done.
TO I feel like maybe I could take notes from Capcom. In particular, the deformation of the character in applying it to a 2D look. The way that they've done that to the *Tekken* characters is really something I've taken note of.


Katsuhiro Harada


Yuichi Yonemori


Yoshiki Domae


Toshiteru Ogata



Competition between publishers frequently breeds suspicion and isolation. What's given rise to this camaraderie between Namco and Capcom?
KH There's a great respect among us for Capcom and the *Street Fighter* series. Every one of us has played the series and quite enjoys it. And not just that, but maybe an aspect of fighting games in general is that because they're so different from other genres, there are certain things that only people who develop fighting games might know about. So there's a level where we can understand each other.

So this time it happened to be that way with Capcom. But even with the *Virtua Fighter* team or even the *Dead Or Alive* team under Itagaki-san and Tecmo at that point – even given our personal history – even then, if we'd decided to make something with them, I think we could have understood each other and initiated talks. This didn't come from the top down, from company execs that we're going to do this with Capcom. This arose from the people actually making the game on both sides.

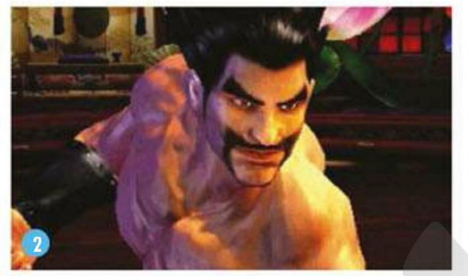
How did the talks with Capcom and Yoshinori Ono play out?
KH There's a live-streaming show that I often appear on on Xbox Live. It turned out that Ono-san and I were on the programme at the same time. That kind of started the conversation so then we said, "Let's go eat some Korean BBQ". And once we did that, we got talking about how it might be interesting to work together. So that was the start of it. But I've liked *Street Fighter* for quite a while now, and the discussion of teaming up with another fighting franchise has occurred before in the past. I've made it known that I wanted to do it with *Virtua Fighter* or *Street Fighter*. But talking with director Yonemori-san about the possibility back then, he's very conservative, so he was saying, "If we do that now, how do you top that? That might be the end of it". So it didn't come together at that early stage. But when my talks with Ono-san came up, we'd been making *Tekken* for over ten years at that point and we thought that maybe now is the right time to do this, and Yonemori-san came around to the same conclusion.

***Street Fighter* has projectile attacks, while *Tekken* obviously doesn't. In designing *Tekken X Street Fighter*, how will you balance that contradictory aspect of combat?**
KH So, Yonemori-san, how do we do it? [Laughter.]
YY I'm still just in the initial stages of trying to comprehend what to do with it. So to consider that question right now is kind of perplexing. Perhaps we can remedy that by having Kazuya throw a fireball. I'm kidding! Naturally we do have to take fireballs and projectiles into the *Tekken* engine and try to see how to make that interesting in our side of the game. ■













INSIDE THE TEKKEN STUDIO

1 *Tekken* chief producer Katsuhiro Harada at one of the cabinets used for internal testing. 2 *3D Prime Edition* lets you play as young Heihachi. 3 Digital Frontier produced the 3D animated movie Tekken: Blood Vengeance. 4 Zafina and Jin square off in *Tekken 6*. 5 Leo returns for *Prime Edition*. 6 The *Tekken* team occupies the same floor as the Project Soul staff. The two games share tech and designers

JET SETTING

Battlefield 3 may have sparked a jet resurgence – but Project Aces is setting the bar

Namco Bandai's Project Aces team has been steadily refining its jet fighter combat since the early '90s when jet simulator *Air Combat* hit the arcades. With the most recent instalment, *Ace Combat: Assault Horizon*, Project Aces sets its missile-lock on opponents far loftier than just other games in the dogfighting genre. We talk to the game's producer and executive director **Kazutoki Kono** and visual director **Kosuke Itomi** about the game's ambitions.


Kazutoki Kono


Kosuke Itomi

Some *Ace Combat* titles have been set in fictional worlds, but *Assault Horizon* is set in the real world. Why the change?

KI Fictional worlds and the real world storylines have their own possibilities. For instance, the real world setting feels closer to the player. But in the sci-fi world you have the freedom to put in unreal moments and it doesn't feel weird if you put in fictional aircraft. So in that sense, there's more you can do in the fictional world. So it depends on which way you want to do. I think we can do both.

KK This is also connected to the issue of different tastes between east and west. And it's not just *Ace Combat* that's struggling with finding middle ground; it's more like the whole Japanese game industry is struggling overall. We're trying to put in more western ideas that might be mesmerising. If we just take the game mechanics and try to make those appealing, the Japanese gaming industry is still able to compete within the western market as well. But if you take *Ace Combat*, the atmosphere and the overall storyline is very important to the game mechanics and that part is very different within the Japanese and western markets.

For example, prior *Ace Combat* games had a very sentimental storyline, while *Assault Horizon* has a different approach than the prior games. And right now consumers are reacting in both ways. People in the west are liking the story for *Assault Horizon* while the Japanese players are saying, "This doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel sentimental, it's not right". You can obviously see that we're having a struggle there. I personally think that we can go in between. Because everybody likes Hollywood movies, right? So there's an approach in between.

The *Ace Combat* franchise has placed its action in both fictional settings and the real world. The latest instalment, *Assault Horizon*, features such locations as Miami, Dubai and Moscow, using actual satellite imagery to create realistic-looking cities down below



There isn't a lot of competition in the arcade-style jet dogfighting genre. How do you keep pushing yourselves?



KK If we think of ourselves as competing only against games in the flight genre – like *HAWX* – then we'll end up with a very limited game. I told the staff that our competitor is *Medal Of Honor* or *Call Of Duty*. We want to make the franchise even bigger, so in that sense we're not really limited in terms of competition.

Has there been discussion of possibly taking the action outside of the plane?

KK Of course there were times during development when we talked about that. *Assault Horizon* doesn't just have jet fighters, it also has choppers and AC-130s, and those kinds of new aircraft were put in. We were able to see the fanbase split a little bit – some like the *Ace Combat* world more generally, but then there are players who only like jet fighters. That showed us that we have to think about it a little more in-depth in how much we're going to take a step further or just make a higher-quality game.



HIGH CALIBUR

Most publishers would kill for a world-class fighting game – Namco Bandai has two

Just because the *Soul Calibur* team occupies the same floor of Namco Bandai's Tokyo headquarters as *Tekken*'s hardly means the two games lack distinct personalities. We sit down with *Soul Calibur V* producer **Hisaharu Tago**, game directors **Haruki Suzaki** and **Daishi Odashima** and chief animation designer **Hiroki Minami** to discuss the series' resurrection and its unique style.

Why did the series get temporarily retired after *SCIV*?
HT It's a very simple answer, actually. At that time Namco Bandai wanted to focus on creating new IPs. Each of the individual staff here were part of *Soul Calibur IV* and they're all very good at what they do. So obviously the way the company was thinking, you have so many talented people concentrated on one project, if you split them up and have them work on new things, obviously you could have a better chance of coming up with a very successful new IP.

Was it difficult to pull everyone back together when work began on *Soul Calibur V*?
HT On an external level, during that time period, Harada-san from the *Tekken* series asked fans, "Do you guys want to see another *Soul Calibur*?" So that helped kick it off. But that was just a catalyst that got a lot of reaction from the community, that they do want to see another sequel. As for the internal reason, there were a few of the staff that really wanted to make a sequel, and they were all very talented individuals. So they knew if they had another chance, they could make something really good.


Hisaharu Tago


Daishi Odashima


Haruki Suzaki


Hiroki Minami





When the team first met to discuss *Soul Calibur V*, what were the goals for the project?
DO The *Soul Calibur* series has released several instalments and been quite a long series up until now, so I felt it was more difficult for people who hadn't played the games before to delve into the latest instalment. I wanted to lower the hurdle for those type of players. Also, Namco Bandai has two big fighting franchises – *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur* – so there's really no point in taking a similar direction to *Tekken*. We should take our own route, and that really is one of the reasons for adding the Critical Gauge to the game, to differentiate it and make it unique.
HS Another thing that sets *Soul Calibur* apart from *Tekken* is the in-depth character creation. Not only that, but the world setting as well. So realising those particular appeals of *Calibur* – the world setting and character creation – we wanted to enhance it and make it even more in-depth to draw even more casual players into the game, to get them interested so then once they're hooked on that part of it, perhaps they'll start enjoying the versus gameplay.
HM Another key aspect of *SCV* is its animation. This is the first time the studio has done facial-animation motion-capture for *Soul Calibur*. There are also several new characters, and obviously the big draw is Ezio, the guest character. We had motion-capture done for these to get the animation. The face is motion-capture, but then we take it and we work with it, adjusting the frames of animation. We put a lot of effort into it to make sure that each frame looks as cool as possible.

Were any measures taken to make the game even more palatable to players outside of Japan?
HT With the weapon effects, you can choose between two different types. The western audience and Japanese audience have different tastes regarding this aspect as well. So this time you can actually select which one you like better – one that more closely resembles the sound effects of movie-type productions or those of anime. ■

ROBOTS AND NINJAS

How two key anime-based game series are putting fans first

Even though attempts at launching videogames in the *Gundam* series outside Japan have proven largely unsuccessful, it's impossible to overstate the importance of the IP in Namco Bandai's native market. With 32 years of history behind it, the Gundam anime has powerful cross-generational appeal in Japan and continues to generate huge revenue across the range of toys and action figures, as well as the game adaptations that have sprung up over the past decade.

Our visit to Namco Hero's Base – one of the company's key amusement facilities in Kawasaki – finds the arcade having a quiet Tuesday night, yet there's still a queue in the corner by the L-shaped battery of *Gundam Extreme Vs* cabinets. A couple of Japanese teens loiter in front of a networked terminal nearby where they can watch live and recorded matches from the game free of charge, almost as if they were staring up at a televised football match in a pub.

Little do these boys realise, **Ryuichiro Baba** – the chief producer behind the game they're presently enraptured by – is standing nearby looking on like a proud parent. We ask Baba how changes in the Japanese arcade scene has affected development of *Gundam* games.

"This is the series' tenth year in the arcade. And if you go back ten years, that was the heyday of fighting games in the arcade," he says. "There weren't many games that used licensed IP in the arcades. The first one was done with Bandai in collaboration with Capcom and that was the first one involving versus fighting for a *Gundam*.





Ryuichiro Baba, *Gundam* series chief producer



Hiroshi Matsuyama, CEO and president, CyberConnect2



And the format was two-on-two, as it is currently.

"Back then, it was mostly Gundam fans who were in their 20s and 30s who were playing the game. Then later on the Gundam SEED franchise was adapted and that was like 20 years after the original Gundam, but it caused the playerbase to radically change and all of a sudden you had a lot of teens who tended to play the game as well. It became quicker-paced than past *Gundam Vs* titles. After that we wanted to create a game that all generations of Gundam fans could enjoy."

Gundam is just one of many popular Japanese anime series for which Namco Bandai publishes videogame adaptations. Fukuoka-based studio CyberConnect2 continues to develop inspired fighting-game riffs on the Naruto series for the company, the latest of which – *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm Generations* – is slated for release in April. When we sit down with CyberConnect2 president and CEO **Hiroshi Matsuyama**, he describes the incredible level of fan engagement that his team is able to harness during development.





Naruto (above) started life as a manga but is now to be found across anime, movies, novels, soundtrack CDs and of course the CyberConnect2-developed videogames

"On our Web site we have a bulletin board where fans from all around the world can put up their thoughts and hopes for how this new game will work," Matsuyama explains. "By the time this article comes out, there will be about 10,000 entries. The majority of these are very long and very detailed. We developed a piece of in-house software that will batch-translate by language so I can read all of them. Only about 500 of the 10,000 messages are from Japan so it's always exciting to me how much interest there is in the *Naruto* series from abroad."

Whether it's *Gundam*'s chief producer visiting an arcade and watching how players interact with his team's game or CyberConnect2's boss soliciting (and, more importantly, reading) feedback from players online, fans clearly have a role to play in shaping the future of these much-loved series. ■

HEAD OF TALES

The producer of the Tales series on the importance of staying true to your vision

Though it was announced a week after our return from Tokyo that the Tales Studio would be dissolved as a wholly owned subsidiary of Namco, there's no reason to anticipate an impending close to the successful JRPG *Tales* series. Here, series producer **Hideo Baba** offers his take on the cultural differences between eastern and western RPGs, and how to keep your soul intact while trying to expand your game's international audience.



Hideo Baba, *Tales* series producer

How would you characterise the difference between eastern and western RPGs?
I suppose that when you look at JRPGs and their differences from western RPGs in terms of being a little more bright and having slightly more optimistic themes, speaking on behalf of Japanese users, a lot of them enjoy games where there's light at the end of the tunnel. They're working toward some sort of goal, and it's not just all despair and destruction. There's a connection between the player and the characters themselves. So when your character's working towards this brighter future, the user maybe applies that to their own life with some sort of goal that they have. Japanese players tend to respond to games like that.

In my opinion, when I see Japanese RPGs and western RPGs, I see them in two contrasting ways. In JRPGs there's a bit of darkness in this vast world of light. You have some small evil force that's trying to spread its influence and people fighting against that. You see that in a lot of JRPGs, whereas in western RPGs it's more like a light in the darkness, where you have this very dark and despairing world and then you have a speck of light, which is usually the hero. And the goal is for the hero to shine a light in the dark and slowly expand it.

How can you translate the *Tales* games' success in Japan to overseas markets?
It's true that in the different markets we've released the *Tales* titles, that they've had varying degrees of success, and our biggest fanbase has been in Japan so far. We feel very strongly that our title has its own unique strengths and what we want to do is, instead of saying, "How can we change our game so that users abroad will find it more interesting?" we feel that we have a great game to begin with. It's our job to play up the strengths of our game to appeal to these players, but not compromising it by changing the essence of the series.



For example, you have *Uncharted 3*, which I just played feverishly over the weekend and completed. And when I was playing that game, there was no indication that the dev team behind *Uncharted* sat down and said, "How can we create this game so it will be popular in Asia?" They had a vision of what they wanted to create, and they tried to create something fun that would appeal to as many users as possible, regardless of race or culture. That's what we're trying to do as well. As creators, we want to share that with as many fans as possible, but without changing it around to fit any particular culture. ■



REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Rage 360, PC, PS3
Id makes a good fist of delivering the next generation on current platforms. No one gets mileage out of hardware like Carmack's crew, and *Rage* is relentlessly beautiful even as it recycles the tired visual iconography of gaming's most clichéd setting: the post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Echochrome II PS3
It's not quite been the season of motion control, but rifling through the year's best caused us to rediscover this too-soon-forgotten PS3 classic. *Echochrome II*'s precision and the quiet, simple joy of puzzling in the shadows add up to something wonderfully original.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim 360, PC, PS3
How can a five-hour session see us end up with more quests on the to-do list than when we began? *Skyrim*'s scale continually astounds. The Mages Guild, Companions and Dark Brotherhood quests finished, we took a break from ticking off sidestories, sharpened our newest sword, and stepped back out with a mind to simply explore the tundra. By the time we reached *Skyrim*'s frozen northern shores we'd hunted bear, fought giants, explored still-clanking dwarven ruins – and somehow picked up another half-a-dozen tasks in our journal.



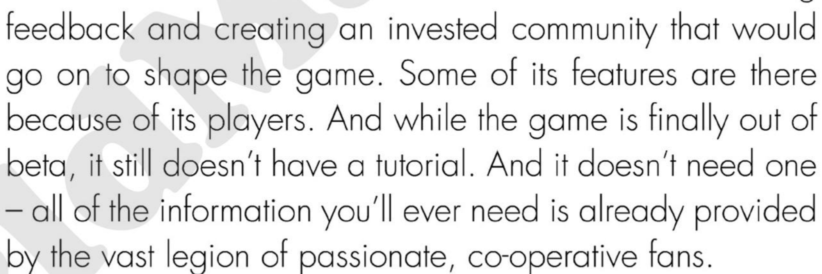
bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Fan feedback and the positive effects of mob rule

Who made *Minecraft* (p118)? Was it Markus Persson, first working alone and then as part of a small team? Or was it the players, who banded together to construct vainglorious follies, swap tips, create wikis and podcasts, make videos and forge the community that surrounds the game? Many games have fanbases, but this year only two had them large and enthusiastic enough to launch conventions. *Minecraft* was one. *Call Of Duty* was the other.

Fans can feel entitled, but *Minecraft*'s have a little more reason than most. By inviting players to pay for the game long before it was finished, Persson asked them to contribute to it in more than a financial sense – he was welcoming feedback and creating an invested community that would go on to shape the game. Some of its features are there because of its players. And while the game is finally out of beta, it still doesn't have a tutorial. And it doesn't need one – all of the information you'll ever need is already provided by the vast legion of passionate, co-operative fans.





Halo has a passionate community too, the importance of which can be seen in the huge symbolic gesture that is *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* (p130). In recreating Bungie's game so completely, new series caretaker 343 Industries demonstrates its commitment to a wary fanbase. Bungie's engagement with its fans was unparalleled – and generated a passion that 343 will want to see continued.

Creating a passionate community isn't something that can be coded. It requires an ability to engage, listen and work with players rather than dictate to them. Sometimes, it requires knowing when to say no. As games become increasingly online, co-operative and customisable, good people skills need to be part of every studio's repertoire.

Minecraft

Minecraft allows you to shape worlds, but first it constructs one for you: a procedurally generated landscape of mountains and dales, deserts and strongholds, that nobody else will ever have seen before. It's an astonishing start to each adventure, and it's critical when it comes to explaining why this seemingly primitive indie project has become a cultural phenomenon while other, far more lavish building games remain curios. The trick is that *Minecraft* doesn't just give you tools allowing you to create things; it also provides a context that ensures you will.

There's no room for blank-page syndrome when you've already got a whole biosphere in front of you, then, while the need to mine even basic materials will see you carving your first sculptures just by hesitantly digging a few holes in the dirt. Mojang's insistence on manufacturing your playground in advance of your arrival also adds a crucial element of stage management to a game where the designers otherwise keep a respectful distance. Yes, *Minecraft* can take you anywhere, but it will always start the same way: you dial in fresh terrain and then you step on to it. Even now, when it's finally out of beta and the Adventure update has introduced levelling, enchantments and dungeons, you begin every campaign as a block-headed Robinson Crusoe, lost, lonely, and aware that all the tools and landmarks you need you will first have to construct.

Minecraft isn't the game its sales figures necessarily suggest: it's stranger and more willful than most mega-hits, and it isn't particularly friendly early on. Lacking tutorials and obvious objectives, it's not uncommon to spend your first few hours simply wandering around, waiting for the moment when the game will actually begin. The fun only emerges if you stop hunting for it: when you change tack and make a plan that the world either supports or undermines, when you pick a distant peak to investigate, and then night falls and the mobs emerge. While Mojang's game takes up almost no hard-drive space, the demands it makes of its players are enormous. Without your imagination, your idiotic schemes and your unlikely hopes, *Minecraft* is just landscape and farmyard cameos. With them, however, it's been turned into everything from a model of the Starship Enterprise to a relief map of the Earth.

Building is the game's most obvious hook, and while great works require great effort, at least the UI doesn't get in the way. Ditching Popit menus and selection wheels, you can do a lot in *Minecraft* with two clicks: one to suck blocks into your inventory, another to spit them back out again. Creating couldn't be simpler, but you also have to gather materials, and while many of Mojang's ludicrous ambitions tend to be realised with quiet pragmatism, the game is not without its pleasing complexities. Certain blocks require specific tools to harvest them. Those tools, in turn, are created from the blocks you've already collected, laid out in a shape-matching crafting grid that allows you to guess at arrangements and ingredients through simple visual logic. Two sticks beneath three planks will give you a wooden pickaxe, so two sticks beneath three cobblestones should provide you with a hardier model. That's an early victory, and a little meddling will quickly net you a sword or a hoe to go with it.

An achievement tree may provide direction, but it's your desire to chip away at the world more effectively that really pushes you through the learning process. When you start to plan ahead, you'll discover that *Minecraft*'s blocky geology, with its subterranean chambers and hidden seams, creates a constant procedural tension between the things you want to build and the environment you have to work within. You can burn to death quite briskly just by putting an axe through the wrong wall and burying yourself in lava, while night, with its zombies and Endermen, sets the pace for your activities, forcing you to work during the day and then fortify yourself after dark.

Publisher Mojang
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now

Mojang has sculpted a learning curve that mirrors the trajectory of human civilisation itself

***Minecraft*'s a powerful** survival horror game at times, and that can be your entire experience if you want it to be. Simply ignore the impulse to focus on anything other than armour, weaponry and enchantments: Mojang doesn't mind. You can turn off the dangers just as easily by switching to Creative mode, which allows you to fly, destroy blocks with a click, and mess about with a full range of materials. It's intoxicating for a few sweet hours, but unless working with friends, or building something truly massive, it can feel like too much of a vacation. Without the foraging, the danger, the food poisoning and explosive Creepers, *Minecraft*'s sandbox isn't quite as rewarding.

The absence of tutorials will drive you toward wikis, forums and the community, but the core mechanics encourage you to reach out as well. As ridiculous as it may seem, Mojang has sculpted a learning curve that mirrors the trajectory of human civilisation itself. It hinges on the notion that survival is an inherently creative business, and it acknowledges the fact that, to thrive, you often have to collaborate. Those first holes you dig eventually become caves, and it's a rare player who can resist turning those caves into dwellings, evenly spacing out the columns and placing torches at pleasing intervals. After you're confident in your ability to stay alive, you'll begin to feel the sharp tug of domesticity, moving from scavenger to architect in a matter of hours. That's when *Minecraft* shifts from disorienting and formless oddity to time-devouring obsession. It invades your dreams if you allow it.

If you're willing to go beyond your first, best cave, you'll move from living off the land to controlling it on a large scale, often with other players. Toiling together



PANDORA'S BLOCKS

If you're a developer, *Minecraft*'s true legacy may be its business model – a model that saw the money starting to roll in when the project was only just taking shape. 'Doing a Notch' is now a common approach for indies looking to build games without publisher pressure, but many teams are already finding out that it's not without difficulties. One central concern is that your audience effectively becomes your publisher. It complains more whenever an update is delayed, or if it doesn't like a new feature. Mojang may have changed development, but it hasn't necessarily taken the sting out of the process.



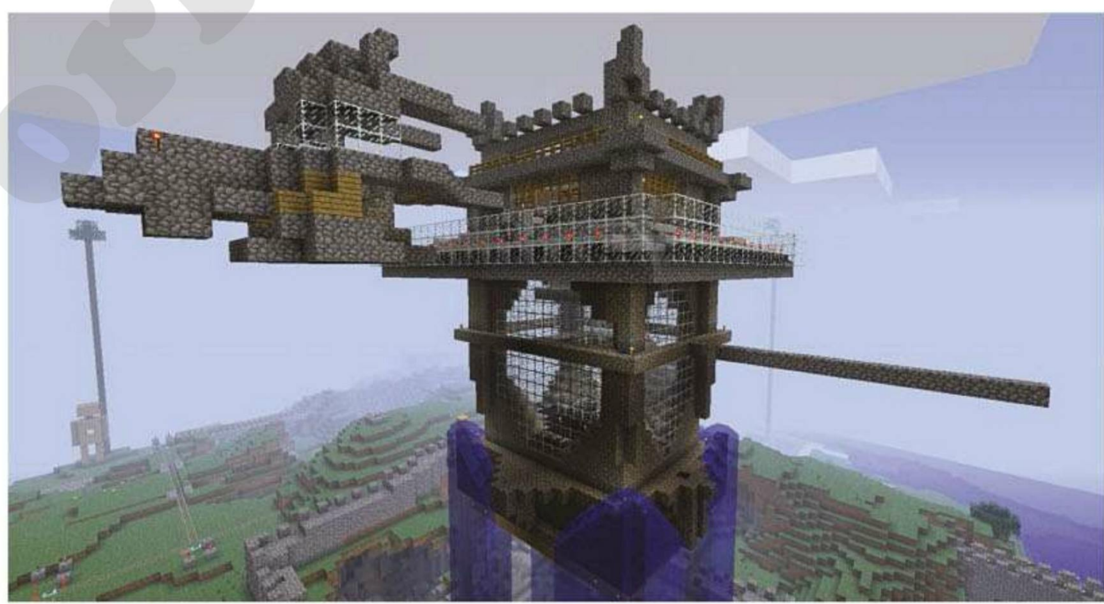
ABOVE Lego is a common analogy for *Minecraft*, but it misses the game's love of vulnerability. Lego blocks let you build things, but they struggle to summon the same sense of heroic loneliness





ABOVE *Minecraft* is best played at ground level, but it doesn't hurt to take to the skies just to understand the full scope of its achievements. The landscape stretches for miles, and it never betrays its procedural roots

RIGHT Building anything as magnificent as this involves confusing online research, deadly in-game experiments, and tiny, crucial victories that bring the two elements together. The crafting system is the hardest thing to get to grips with, so it's best to leave that entirely to the FAQs



If you're Robinson Crusoe, Man Friday is a wiki, and *Minecraft* has some of the best wikis available, offering smart and detailed explanations of every material and concept in the game, up to and including structures like this

on shared servers, you can construct masterful works, or, more likely, highly evolved, extremely pedantic works where precious, hard-to-get metals are lavished gratuitously on chequerboard flooring. *Minecraft*'s not as basic a tool as its graphics suggest: its controls allow for surprising precision, even when building in teams.

It's an excellent trophy cabinet, too, and picking through multiplayer servers offers insights into the strange things that people choose to celebrate. A teenager might build fantasy castles or a huge throne of skulls sitting on a flaming lake, but he's just as likely to have recreated his local shopping mall in obsessive detail. A cactus-riddled setting may invoke the wild west, but the overall effect shifts from genre piece to human comedy when newcomers are forced to obey draconian rules that will have them banished if they pick the wrong flowers.

Minecraft's creations probably say more about their peculiar engineers than they do about the game itself, but constructing them provides a crash course in the role that utility plays in design: how shapes work together, which resources you need to build your cities around, and why it's a good idea to be able to see your beautiful house in the countryside from afar, so that you don't lose it forever when you go out to kill a pig. While its square clouds and odd, geometrical animals could give you the impression that *Minecraft* is aimed at some strange minority, the reality is often a trip through mid-week television. Grand Designs, Extreme Makeover, Frozen Planet: Mojang's money-spinner is part home-makeover show, part nature documentary.

When it comes to being a world, *Minecraft* is confident, personable and bluntly pretty, with lavish dawns and beautiful lop-sided mountains. When it comes to being a game, it can lose focus, relying on recently added RPG elements that don't yet fit. As the patches pile up, you can sense Mojang fumbling for classic videogame closure, but perhaps subsequent updates will tie these loose ends together.

For the time being, though, *Minecraft*'s burgeoning complexities have yet to undermine its all-important simplicity. You can blame the game's meandering evolution on its famous extended beta, but its success lies not with the things that got added along the way so much as the things that didn't. Levelling and Portals aside, the core of *Minecraft* is still space: space to build, space to explore, space to creatively, even accidentally, do yourself in. It's heroic in its open-endedness, especially when you consider that leaving something open-ended is often the most daring choice.

"I will not tell the player how to live," reads the poem marking the conclusion of version 1.0.0, and the sentiment rings true. The central achievement of *Minecraft* is a willingness to let the player define the experience; to make them the most interesting element in a world that's already dynamic and fascinating. It's a decision that has made designer Markus Persson a millionaire, and it's ensured that the most important PC game of the past five years is also the most timely. *Minecraft* creates pockets of unmapped wilderness in a world that's increasingly cluttered, and offers the illusion of control in an era in which genuine control is so rarely available. It's the promise, particularly potent these days, of ownership; of not just shaping a landscape, but also calling it home.

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TAKING THE TUBE

It's safe to say that, without YouTube, Mojang's game would have taken longer to reach four million players. Online video's a very sympathetic technology already: it's built around a thin-client 'good enough' approach, and it also allows *Minecraft*'s most talented designers to show off their work with no danger of griefers descending and picking the whole thing to pieces. YouTube isn't the reason that *Minecraft* works so well, then, but it provides the perfect shop window for the contemporary developer.

Post Script

Interview: Markus Persson, founder, Mojang

After a two-year beta that has seen over four million copies sold, *Minecraft* has finally hit version 1.0.0. We catch up with the game's creator, **Markus 'Notch' Persson**, to ask why his lo-fi construction kit has captured such a huge audience, and discover how he knew it was finally ready for release.

Why do you think players have flocked to your style of creative game, while other games that allow people to build things often scare them off?
I think creativity through limitation is key to this. If the player gets too many options right off the bat when starting the game, it's easy to become overwhelmed and lose track of what you want to do. And if the game is too powerful, making something that looks impressive takes too much skill and time. With the right amount of constraints, expressing yourself at all becomes a challenge. Personally, I find a similar joy in programming competitions that put limits on what can be done, like the Java4K game competition, or the Ludum Dare 48-hour programming competitions.

How have you approached the idea of adding complexity to the game – the crafting, the RPG elements – while keeping the core of the game so simple?
I've tried to make sure to add new features so that they become available at some later point in the game rather than immediately when the player starts the game. Essentially, *Minecraft* has been very much defect-driven development, where I play the game and think about what feels like it's missing, and what could be added. As a result, a vast majority of the stuff we've tried ended up actually being in the game. And I still think *Minecraft* could be a much more complex and deep game than it is today.

Is the evolution of *Minecraft* through its beta stages something you had in mind from the beginning, or has it been dictated by experiments and by what the community wants?
Overall, the way *Minecraft* evolved is very similar to my early hopes of the game, although the exact shape of it now is definitely a result of community interaction. The most iconic part of *Minecraft*, the Creeper, was a happy accident, however. I made all models for the game pragmatically in code, and got the length and height variables switched when I tried to make a pig. So I made it explode. When it comes to catering to the community, I've tried hard to stick to 'my' version of the game, but sometimes the community is just right, such as when it came to adding ladders or booster tracks.



"Minecraft has been very much defect-driven development, where I play the game and think about what feels like it's missing"



The absence of a real tutorial in the game forces players to engage with the community – is this another happy accident? If you were building the game from scratch, would you build a tutorial?
This is one of the biggest lessons from making *Minecraft*. Originally, the lack of a tutorial was mostly because the game was in alpha, and I could just tell people directly what they needed to know. Then they started telling other players, and it kind of grew. Now we have several huge wikis and forums dedicated to the game, and the amount of quality content on video sharing sites is just amazing. Not having a tutorial kind of forces people to seek out other players, and that's also been the biggest advertisement for the game. I think making a complex modern PC game these days can work really well without any instructions. Besides, Roguelikes have been doing this for decades.

What makes Version 1.0.0 the release version?
With millions of sold copies, it didn't really make much sense to call the game 'pre-release' any more. Jens [Bergensten, Mojang developer] and I sat down and decided on a set of features that we'd have to complete before branding *Minecraft* as a complete game, and that's basically what *Minecraft* 1.0.0 is about. I'm not sure much has changed with the feeling of the game. It's still going to be this slightly chaotic labour of love, but at least now we will stop pretending like it's not a real game.

Was the Adventure update – the boss fight, the levelling, the strongholds – a conscious effort to give a little more shape to *Minecraft*? Could adding shape to such a sandbox be dangerous?
Dramatically changing the game in such a way is terrifying, but it was something I always wanted to include. To me, a game without some kind of goal, however unreachable, will eventually stagnate and become uninteresting. Compare *Sim City,* which ends with you destroying your own city out of boredom, and *Ancient Domains Of Mystery*, which ends with you dying from some random encounter while struggling towards some goal you probably will never reach. I made sure to make the ending optional, however. There's nothing in the game that actively encourages you to beat the game.

After *Minecraft*'s famous beta, would you ever consider making a game the 'traditional' way?
That depends on what fits the game. The games I personally want to make will probably fit a model like that of *Minecraft*'s very well. ■

Mario Kart 7

First things first: snaking is no more. Since *Mario Kart 64*, players have been able to boost out of drifts by rapidly steering from left to right; by *Mario Kart DS* it could be built up so quickly that players chained them together not around bends, but down straights. The series' previous handheld outing saw it make its online debut, and it was ultimately ruined by the need to ludicrously slither down straights like a ski slalom to stand any chance of success.

In *Mario Kart 7*, drift-boosting is accessed not by the frantic mashing of opposing directions, but by the sharpness of your turn. It means a renewed, welcome focus on optimal racing lines and, on 150cc especially, involves a great deal more risk, sharp turns from wide starts making for opportunities to crash into barriers or career off the edge of the track. It's just one of several ways in which Nintendo has looked to the past and learned from its mistakes, reusing the mechanics that worked, and refining or dropping entirely those that didn't.

While the drift is still an essential component for victory, it's just one way to boost your speed. *Mario Kart Wii*'s stunts return – though their Tony Hawk excesses have been discarded – and while the game's motion controls are also back, they're mercifully locked away in a novelty firstperson mode. Hop off one of the many ramps or inclines and you'll boost on landing. These, not drifts, are your primary method of topping up speed, spread liberally around courses and allowing access to new routes. Coins, much missed since GBA's *Super Circuit*, increase your maximum speed and are meticulously placed, laid out in inviting curves around corners to suggest racing lines and point out shortcuts.

Karts are now customisable, and for every 50 coins you collect you'll unlock a new chassis, wheel or glider type. On the ground, these affect your character's weight, speed and handling, breaking away from the light-medium-heavy choice of previous games in the series and making character selection largely a matter of preference rather than playstyle. Bigger tyres mean better offroad performance, opening up access to more ramps and shortcuts. Take off from a blue boost pad on one of the larger ramps and the glider deploys automatically, sending you sailing over long distances. At first, you'll use it to dodge hot-air balloons, and it feels contrived. Later, you'll spot thermal currents issuing from roadside warp pipes. Then you'll discover that you can pull back to gain height, cutting out swathes of track at the expense of speed, or dive to ensure that you hit the ground running. A little later you'll realise that the glider – along with the ability to race underwater, a propeller emerging when required – enables Nintendo's biggest change to its tried-and-tested formula: verticality.

Mario Kart 7's courses are chock-full of alternative routes and branching paths. Shortcut isn't really the word: some of them are longer than the straight and narrow, but offer an escape from the chaos and may contain an untouched cluster of coins or power-ups, an arcing bend or ramp, or all of them at once. At ground level, these paths are often hidden from view until you whizz past them: you'll notice one on the first lap and take it on the second, by which point you'll have spotted even more. By the third lap, you'll have found more above and below, and find yourself wishing for a co-pilot with pad and pen. You'll set about digging into the time trials, where you can save up to seven ghosts per track, the seemingly endless possibilities an invigorating, dizzying thrill.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Nintendo EAD/Retro Studios
Format 3DS
Release Out now

Nintendo has looked to the past and learned from its mistakes, reusing the mechanics that work



These are the most intricate course designs in the series, and also the best. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the 16 retro-styled courses, which feel a little flat in comparison. They've been retooled with coins, ramps and the odd underwater section, but they were designed around old systems ill-befitting the new ones, the SNES and GBA courses throwing up right-angles, the Wii tracks ludicrous width.

At least they look gorgeous. In fact, everything does. A combination of 3DS's power and small screen means few sharp edges, with textures polished to a reflective shine. The striking neon and bold colours of Waluigi Pinball render it unrecognisable from the DS original, and comparing Koopa Troopa Beach with its N64 incarnation shows that this handheld hardware has more than enough power under the hood to withstand Vita's looming challenge. It's smooth, too, the action never dropping below 60fps even with the depth slider at its maximum. As in *Super Mario 3D Land*, the use of 3D is at once easier on the eye and more effective than in the system's early releases. Before too long you forget it's there, only jolted out of your focus on the relentless pace and the ever-changing landscapes by the occasional tell-tale flutter of foreground cherry blossom petals or layers of lens flare.

Nintendo has clearly been experimenting with how to better exploit its system's obvious potential, and its solution is a natural, graceful implementation of 3D that complements and even improves its games, rather than feeling tacked on. It's a delicate balance, and one it's struck twice: once with its hardware, and again by elegantly intertwining *Mario Kart 7*'s numerous mechanics into a coherent, balanced whole, making for the most rewarding racing experience since that beloved SNES original. As a package – with its wealth of courses, characters and customisation options, its time trials and online modes – this surely beats it. Nintendo may have taken its time producing the game – when doesn't it? – but never has the wait for a new *Mario Kart* been so worth it.

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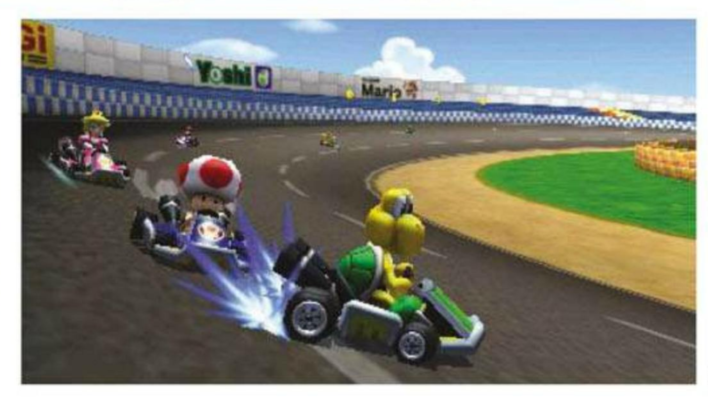


LEFT As in *Super Mario Kart*, you drop a few coins when hit by an item. You can only hold a maximum of ten, but they respawn on each lap and it's worth picking them up to stop others from doing so. **BELOW** This is one of the earliest uses of the glider: fail to avoid the balloons and you'll bounce harmlessly off them. Later you'll weave through torrents of water





ABOVE As always, Lakitu starts the races, but for the first time in the series he takes part in them too. You'll unlock a new character for each 150cc grand prix victory; win every 50cc race and you can race as your Mii





The Lucky 7 is most useful if you're trailing, though knowing which item is next can be tricky with so much going on

Post Script

This time around, Mario Kart's weapons are less likely to leave you feeling blue

You can set your watch by it in *Mario Kart 7*'s 50cc grands prix. That tell-tale siren, a resoundingly non-threatening sound effect in the finest Nintendo tradition, rings out late in the second lap, or early in the third. If you don't recognise it yet – and you surely will, the longer you spend learning the tracks on the game's lowest difficulty – a glance at the map on the lower screen lets you know that it's coming. All that hard work gone in an instant, the game cheaply punishing you for doing too well, producer Hideki Konno's equivalent of Chaplin's cane round your neck, yanking you back into the chasing pack.

Mario Kart has always been as much about power-ups as it has driving skill, but in singleplayer the blue shell's appearance has often felt too timely to be a coincidence. Fired from the back of the pack, it races forward and homes in on the leader. It drops from above, and is thus immune to trailing banana skins, orbiting shells or the well-timed boosts that facilitate escape from other weaponry. Not only is it cruel, but it's pointless: what help is it to the person in last place to slow down the leader?

The blue shell epitomises how Nintendo has struggled with the *Mario Kart* series. It's tinkered with its properties – making it follow the centre of the track having previously hit walls, and travel through the air when it once took out any other racers in its pack, a change to which Nintendo has thankfully reverted here – and its name, too: it's been known as the Leader, the Spiny, and the Blue Spiny Shell. Of all the arguments for holding up *Super Mario Kart* as the pinnacle of the series, perhaps the most convincing is that the blue shell was introduced in its successor, *Mario Kart 64*, and has been ever-present since.

The SNES game offered a mere eight items, the same as the number of karts on the track. There was the feather, with which you could escape danger as well as take shortcuts with perfectly timed jumps, but sadly it hasn't been seen since. You couldn't hold items behind you, but a well-timed drop of a banana skin could take out a red shell, while green ones could be fired ahead to clear away obstacles. The star made you invincible and boosted top speed, but only for a few seconds. *Super Mario Kart*'s items were balanced against each other and didn't dominate what was, at heart, a racing game.

The N64 version added not just the blue shell, but seven other items too, and the balance tilted towards offensive weapons that those in first place only saw for a split-second before impact. No wonder the series began to feel so confused. Nintendo's approach to the development of each new game in the series seemed to have had two guiding principles, More and Different, instead of simply Better. *Mario Kart Wii*'s item count? Twenty.

On the face of it, *MK7* doesn't break the mould. There are 18 items, three of them new, and the knockabout Wacky Races thrills are much as they ever were. In our experience, though, the blue shell appears far less frequently on 150cc difficulty, a combination of the struggle to stay at the front of the pack and the presence of the new Lucky 7, which gives those lagging behind seven items at once and therefore a far greater chance of catching up. The Tanooki tail, meanwhile, is a fine all-purpose defensive weapon, orbiting around your kart to swat away banana skins, chasing shells and other riders.

Moreover, the numerous routes through courses, and the opportunities to quickly pick up speed from jumps and boost pads after a spin-out, mean that items are far less likely to change the outcome of a race. Thus, after almost two decades of fiddling, Nintendo has rediscovered, whether by accident or design, what made the original so special: a suite of power-ups that complement the action rather than define it. ■

Need For Speed: The Run

Publisher EA
Developer EA Black Box
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

The notion that playing games is a waste of your time is nonsense, of course, but unfortunately *Need For Speed: The Run* lets the side down. Stuffed with a procession of long-winded loading sequences, protracted menu flipping and unskippable cutscenes, it often feels like there's as much watching as there is playing. Time wasted, in other words.

The Run's problems are manifold, and loading is only the most acute. In singleplayer, each stage requires a loading screen of well over a minute, the gap from one race to the next a yawning chasm. In multiplayer things are worse: loading can take anything up to five minutes, and often simply gives up altogether and remains in limbo. This is on a patched retail copy, and impossible to defend. As one online compatriot muttered while Las Vegas loaded: "You could drive there quicker than this". Purely in terms of the respect it has for its players' time, *The Run* is a failure.

Regular framerate drops and glitchy physics add to the general shonkiness, and even Autolog is spoiled. Its incorporation in *The Run* makes last year's chic and slick innovation feel like an irritant, wheezing for yet more minutes between races while connecting rather than telling you anything useful.

Even ignoring these many technical failings, and despite an excellent concept, *The Run* still falls far short of being a good game. The idea is a non-stop race across America: San Francisco to New York, taking in Vegas and Detroit, against more than 200 other drivers. The reality is a series of short A-to-B stages that mix up their objectives but never quite hit the right balance, a disjointed presentation that turns promising-sounding stretches like The Great Lakes into disconnected vignettes.

This chopping up of the long route into smaller chunks could work if you were still responsible for your overall position in the race, but *The Run* never allows this, instead dictating your progression up the ranks rigidly, each stage setting a target ranking, with no wiggle room. This is in part because *The Run*'s singleplayer has a heavy narrative focus. This is a car game in which the driver is a character.

Inevitably, he's an unlikeable goon who smirks his way through a mob/girl/redemption story that feels like The Fast And The Furious machinima. This might be forgivable if you could skip cutscenes, or if the occasional QTEs weren't devoid of imagination or engagement. Instead you're essentially playing Simon Says to unlock the next part of a video, and while the setups – escaping the police, fighting crooks – have a keen cinematic eye, any tension is wasted. Surely players expect more in 2011 than tapping 'X' to run?

There are three viewing angles: thirdperson, firstperson and a bonnet cam. Choosing between the first two comes down to preference, but the latter is spoilt by wavering and occasionally absent textures on the bonnet itself. Sometimes the lighting effects mix textures into strange oily swirls, while at other times it feels like you're driving one big polygon.

The campaign's five-hour running time is doubled by Challenge mode, which goes over the same tracks with different conditions, although, like the main game's objectives, they rapidly begin to repeat. In both modes *The Run* manages to throw up high-octane sequences and the odd neat trick, but it's all undermined by the same problem: cheating opponents.

Success in the racing genre relies on great opposition. In *The Run* you will catch up to racers at 180mph, only to see them accelerate away at an impossible pace. Later, these speed demons will slow to a crawl on a predefined stretch of road to allow an overtaking manoeuvre. And it gets worse. We've been in the lead and driving at top speed with boost engaged on a straight line to the finish, only to watch in disbelief as an opponent in the same car cruised past to steal the win. Then there are the non-racing cars on the road, which have a habit of turning directly into you for no reason and with no warning, a lousy trick that's impossible to avoid and feels rigged. It's a frequent and simply unforgiveable piece of rule-breaking.

Online multiplayer tops everything. The races are built around a neat structure whereby participants sign up for a short series of stages with a random prize at the end, rather than a single encounter. But in-game the races regularly suffer from framerate drops, ghosting from opposition cars, and collision physics that behave inconsistently or just don't work at all. Sometimes it all goes very wrong: on one terrifying occasion the track just plain disappeared, leaving eight racers tumbling through a texture-free brown vacuum, chatting about how this never happened in *Hot Pursuit*. That *The Run* crashed a retail PS3 five times during our review sessions says a lot about its all-round flakiness.

Perhaps half of our online races worked as they should. For those brief snatches, *The Run* gives glimpses of a different game, a tight and thrilling urban racer in which cars weave loops around oncoming traffic, drift around corners and boost out with jerks of inertia. But then it's time for another long loading screen and the taste is soon forgotten.

The Run doesn't have the structure or production values to carry off its concept. Even if it did, its successes would be smothered by a procession of awful technical flaws. Lacking charm and polish, only the *Need For Speed* name will sell the game – which will no doubt mean that it fares well enough. But in a year that has seen gaming's biggest franchises one-upping each other and demanding players' attention like never before, *The Run* simply doesn't cut it.

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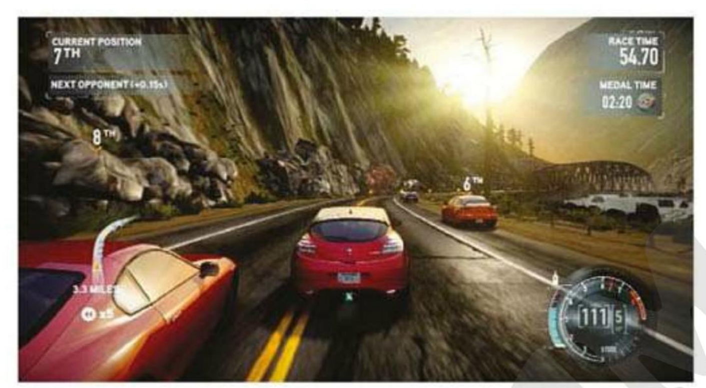
On one occasion the track vanished, leaving eight racers tumbling through a texture-free brown vacuum



GUNNING THE RUN
The cars themselves are perhaps *The Run*'s strongest suit: from Tier 1 up to the Supercars it's got a great selection of vehicles that includes dream machines next to utilitarian classics from Alfa Romeo. The muscle cars handle with a satisfying bulk and gravity, while the more fantastical likes of the Lamborghini Gallardo feel like twitchy powerhouses that can be made to glide at velocity. But the handling model for certain classes feels a little too exaggerated. In particular, the small sports cars resemble air-hockey pucks more than Porsches.

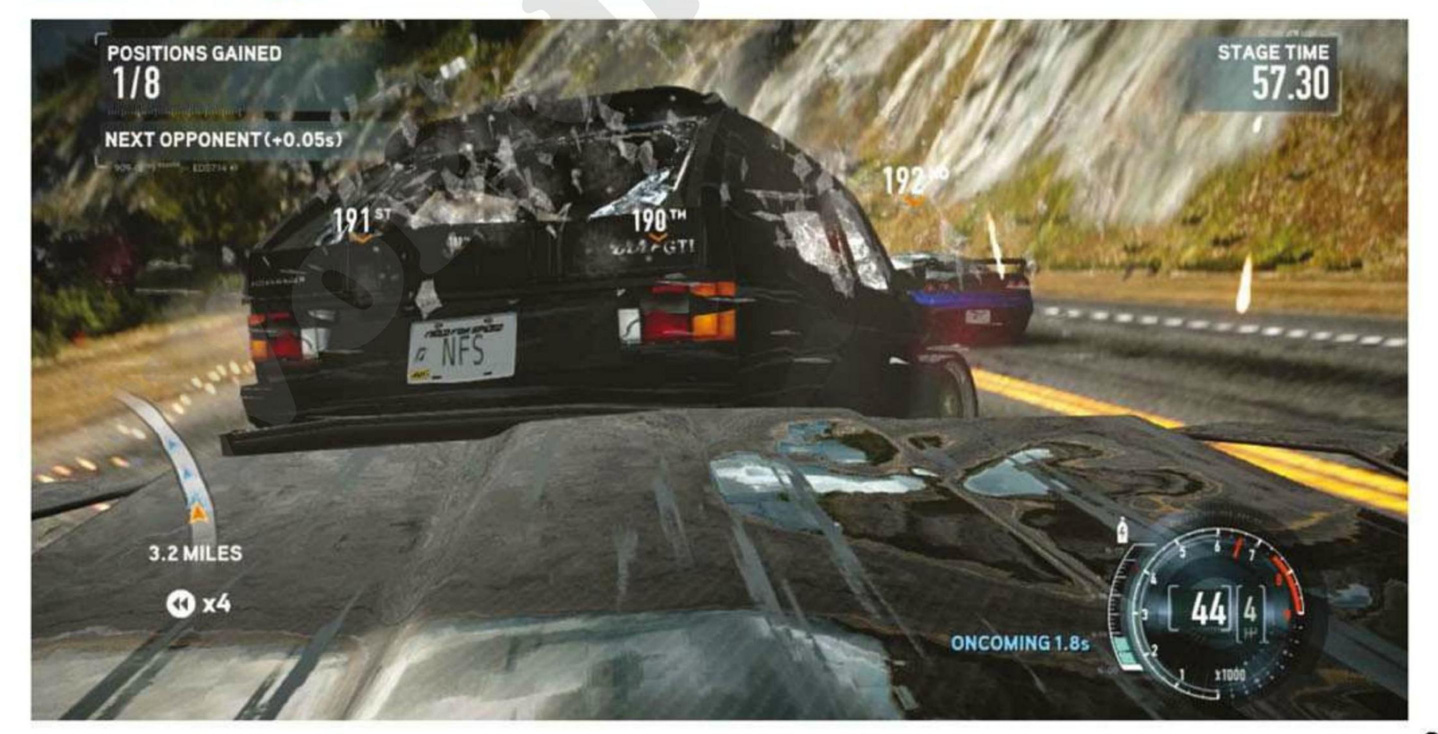


RIGHT The straight-up racing feels over-prescribed, dictating exactly how many places you can gain in a race. Head-to-head battles, 'catch up' sequences (time trials) and pursuits liven up the formula. **BELOW** *The Run*'s scenery has its moments, though it's a little heavy on bloom effects. Such touches at least distract from the pop-in, basic textures and poor draw distance also in evidence





ABOVE By staying in the oncoming lane and mixing in a few dodges it's possible to stretch out the boost for enormous lengths of the track. Not that this makes any difference to the other racers, who catch up regardless



The bonnet view casts a harsh light on the game's visual issues, with bodywork that looks like it's been dipped in acid and scrubbed. It's distracting to the point that you'll simply avoid the option



The Run's audio is among its most accomplished features, offering up throaty roars and painful tyre screeches

Post Script

Porsches for courses

Martin Amis, in his book Invasion Of The Space Invaders, comments on the idea of racer-as-simulation: "It sounds rather like driving, doesn't it?" A devastating line, even if it is half-serious, it suggests Amis wouldn't have much love for *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*. But his comment was made in 1982, when his subject and the genre's pinnacle was *Pole Position*, a far cry in concept and technology from a *Gran Turismo* or even *Need For Speed: The Run*. The comment's a snapshot from when games were simpler, and racers had enough trouble making the track move convincingly, never mind creating a sensation of speed.

The genre has undergone a staggering transformation in the years since, and in that time, one franchise has risen to the top. Since its debut in 1994, *Need For Speed* has sold over 110 million copies, making it gaming's most successful racing franchise. In at least one respect, it's also the most interesting.

Need For Speed's mass popularity goes hand in hand with what is either an identity crisis or a winning strategy. It has moved from serious simulation to full-on Lamborghini fantasies without missing a beat, and the past two years have presented especially diverse entries: Slightly Mad Studios' excellent *NFS: Shift*, the 'casual' *NFS: Nitro* on Wii, semi-MMOG *NFS: World* on PC, Criterion's irresistible *Hot Pursuit*, and the smooth and sophisticated *Shift 2: Unleashed*.

These games are not of a type, and neither is *NFS: The Run*. The execution can be bashed but it's yet another departure: a linear, narrative-driven take that's as inspired by action games as it is other racers. Like *COD*, it chooses spectacle over freedom.

In one way this is exactly what Amis wanted in 1982: more than mere mimicry, a car game that captured the fantasy of the activity – to drive impossibly well in impossibly glamorous vehicles, rather than pootling around in a virtual Fiesta. It's a seductive ideal delivered on by many great racers. But if that is one part of *The Run*, then the other is a car handling model that, even if it's not an especially genre-leading example, is still a simulation of considerable sophistication. It feels rather like driving, but when you're in control of a Porsche 911 tearing over the Golden Gate bridge, isn't that quite the compliment?

This example is a driver's dream – one of the many that exist, and one of the many that *NFS* has brought to virtual life since it debuted in 1994. The *NFS* series is full of highlights and low points – brilliant reinvention across generations of hardware next to mediocre sequels and dodgy one-offs – and so diverse that you cannot pick one entry that defines the brand.

The Run has several of these characteristics, and even if it is a flop, the series could easily absorb the blow. It's also important to acknowledge that while critics might think one thing, the opinion of the buying public is often different. Roundly panned games still find their way to the top of the charts, after all. *Need For Speed* experiments more than any other major franchise not because it can afford isolated failures – although it can – but because doing so finds it new audiences.

There are many reasons why *NFS* is so popular, but surely one of them is this protean nature: it understands driving has many forms and gradations. *The Run* may not have much else going for it, but in its unusual approach to the genre it at least tries to offer something new. The first game made an impact by taking driving seriously, and the series has remained relevant by taking it in all sorts of other directions. Nowadays, to say that a game sounds rather like driving is to speak of it favourably. That's in no small part thanks to *NFS*, a series that knows that its subject matter offers so many avenues, and has captured more of them than any other. ■

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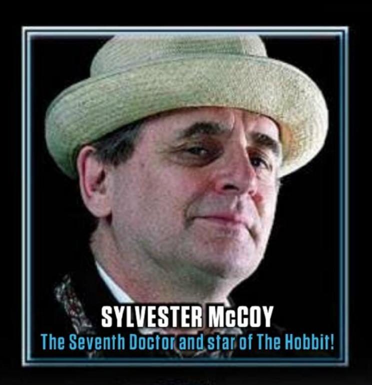
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Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary

The feeling that *Anniversary* is something of a PR stunt can be hard to shake. A full recreation of the game that launched the Xbox brand – glitches and all – given some current-gen cosmetic surgery, it's impossible to imagine a release that could tell us less about 343 Industries' understanding of the series, beyond the fact that it has to preserve it.

Still, as the hardware generation drags on, *Anniversary* is at least a reminder of how far we've come. Push the back button at any point during the game and you'll time-travel ten years, as the verdant foliage and detailed textures of 343's facelift melt away to reveal the aged features of the original release below. In some respects, Bungie's visuals stand up today. The art style certainly does – the graceful curves and deep purple hues of Covenant technology look as good now as they did then – but in places the lack of detail surprises. The gravity lift midway through Truth And Reconciliation illustrates the point best. With the updated visuals it's a lush, rocky outcrop illuminated by the tunnel of light at its centre. In the original game it's a brown bowl with a translucent tube glowing weakly from its centre.

That's not to suggest that *Anniversary*'s updated visuals look as good as they could. Bungie's *Reach* engine offers better, a fact you can confirm for yourself by trying *Anniversary*'s *Reach*-powered multiplayer. Matchmaking is simply a Reach map pack, but Firefight lets you take on waves of Covenant troops in a level repurposed from the campaign – meaning these environments are given two entire cosmetic upgrades on the same disc. The comparison does no favours for the remake, but it does demonstrate the extent to which 343 was prepared to sacrifice superficial sheen in the name of fidelity.

And, visuals aside, *Anniversary* is *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Occasionally, you'll think you've spotted a bit of tweaking suggestive of sacrilegious tinkering with the original code, but the effect is illusory: the walls of the Pillar of Autumn might be layered with consoles, pipes and plating this time around, but it's mostly clever texture work: they behave like the flat surfaces of the original game. At times, this layering of new detail doesn't quite hold together (we've seen a Hunter's arm clip through a piece of wall that, in the original, simply wasn't there, and also had the misfortune to fall off a cliff edge that appears to have been slightly extended), but for the most part 343's visuals mesh with Bungie's game without incident. That said, purists may object to the presence of directional arrows easing some of the horror of a Library return visit.

What all this faithfulness makes for, then, is a familiar game – yet, for those who've spent more time with *Reach*, *ODST* and *Halo 3* over the past few years, a surprisingly unfamiliar one. There's a purity in the original *Halo* that even Bungie failed to recapture in sequels, a magic conjured by a mixture of a few simple ingredients – easy access to grenades and melee attacks, rechargeable shields, the two-weapon limit – which, when introduced to foes as formidable as the Elites, suddenly sparks into life.

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Bungie/343 Industries
Format 360
Release Out now

Reach's Elites were crafty enemies, certainly, but their talents seemed more focused on avoiding your shots than hunting you down. *Halo*'s enemies offer no quarter, their canny aggression even now managing to startle. Equally capable of tactical retreats as they are flanking manoeuvres that catch you off-guard, fighting them on Legendary is as close to an equal match-up as any FPS since has managed to offer.

Be sure to play on Legendary. Even on Heroic, the Covenant don't put up quite as much of a fight as you may recall

And be sure to play on Legendary, because *Halo* veterans will find that, even on Heroic, the Covenant don't seem to put up quite as much of a fight as you may recall. Ten years of *Halo* have honed our tactics – the plasma-then-human-pistol combo to quickly down Elites, the shot in the back to kill a Hunter before it's even noticed you – and we found ourselves working through what once were difficulty spikes with surprisingly speed.

Indeed, heading back to *Halo* is enough to make you realise that all the additions to the series over the past ten years – dual wielding, new vehicles, new weapons, *Halo 3*'s equipment, *Reach*'s armour abilities, and, yes, even the Brutes – were necessary. Not to make better games, but to make different ones. Every tweak to the balanced combat at *Halo*'s core gave us new tactics to learn, and new skills to master. *Halo*'s combat might have been nigh perfect, but this was also its problem: without changes it had nowhere else to go.

Famously imperfect, however, is *Halo*'s level design. The overall structure, which sees levels reused as the Master Chief journeys to the Library and then fights his way back through the Flood-infested ring, is still effective. But the repetition within individual levels irks even more than it did then. Assault On The Control Room is an epic fight through and across the ring, but it's also a repetitive slog through reused rooms and across repeated bridges that – despite the still exhilarating combat – quickly begins to fatigue.

But perhaps that's the point. *Halo* exhibits a single-minded focus that the modern FPS, with its choreographed set-pieces and thrilling scripted sequences, largely disregards. This is a game about the arc of a perfectly thrown grenade, a game of tense cat-and-mouse with foes as powerful as you, a game about constant improvisation with the tools at your disposal. It's a game that always feels tactical, and a game that – even now – has the capacity to surprise. Bungie resisted the subtitle, but it's as true now as it was then. It might be older, it might look younger, but this is still *Combat Evolved*.

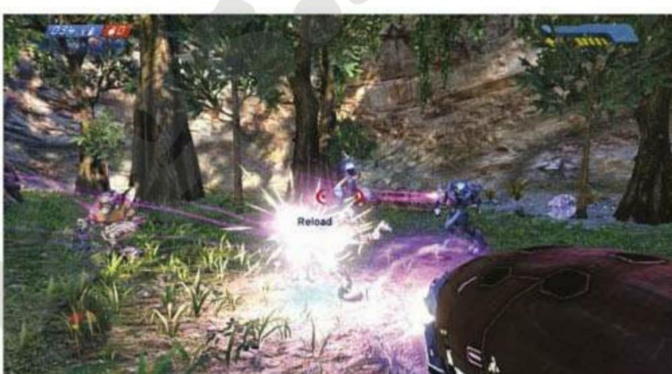
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LEFT One of the advantages of *Halo* over its sequels is that marines won't leap into the driver's seat of your Warthog once you exit, meaning you can explore at your own pace after a battle without fear of them driving it away.
BELOW The needler feels as savage as ever, and its ability to spark off undetonated grenades (which in turn detonate more) leads to some pyrotechnic chain reactions



ABOVE The Hunters of this *Halo* feel easier to defeat than their later brethren, the massive weakpoint leading to rinse-and-repeat tactics that jar against the flowing improvisation of the rest of the game





The relentless Flood are as disruptive a presence as ever, their appearance necessitating a shift from tactical battles against intelligent AI to sustained periods of back-against-wall self-defence

Kinect Sports: Season 2

Beneath the pleasant, polished façade of *Kinect Sports: Season 2* is mainstream gaming's identity crisis writ small. What once seemed like a simple *Wii Sports* copycat is now perched somewhere between the sheeny glitz of Saturday evening TV (once again, Peter 'The X Factor' Dickson is on menu duties) and the quirky leaderboard-chasing sensibilities of an iPhone app. The overall package is as slickly realised as you might expect, but with the drawn-out headline events themselves on one side, and the brisk, minigame variants on the other, you can see subtle signs of a design that's quietly lacking in direction.

The six sports on the menu this year provide relatively little that videogames – and motion control – haven't seen before, so it's up to Rare and Big Park to distinguish the package through a mixture of style and focus. The two safest offerings are golf and tennis. The former is as good as you'd hope, and the latter is a little wonkier than you might expect, largely thanks to weak, weightless animation, and collision detection of such comical leniency that instant replays can make it look like you're using the Force as much as your racquet.

Fortunately, there are more interesting games available elsewhere. Darts, for example, features a neat pull-back-to-lock aiming mechanic that makes up for a bewildered announcer (who likes to suggest that a game's getting interesting just after it's finished) and some shockingly unsubtle rubber-banding when playing against rookie opponents. It's full of good-natured humour, too, allowing you to psyche out your rivals by making gestures over their shoulders. Skiing, meanwhile, ditches any of the sport's alleged intricacies in favour of a smart emphasis on the simple pleasures of bombing across the snow at frightening speeds. It's as arcadey as *Season 2*'s main events get, with a racing line strung between a fluttering sequence of time-extend flags, and a neat jumping mechanic is in place to provide occasional bursts of very mild drama.

Baseball and American football complete the package in an energetic bid to win over US audiences who may have been confused by all the yelling about the oche. Both sports wisely cut the clutter from some potentially complex rule-sets, offering involving, if rather primitive, caricatures. Football manages to retain the game's tactical heart despite a severely limited range of available plays, while baseball is particularly successful at turning each of its distinct elements into entertaining events in their own right. Racing for a base borrows a little of *Gears Of War*'s roadie run momentum before terminating in an excellent carpet-shredding slide, and pitching is transformed into a very simple puzzle game as you're informed of your opponents' particular weaknesses – an inability to deal with slow, left-handed balls, say, or panic in the face of a fast curving shot – and then have to play to them.

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Rare, Big Park
Format 360
Release Out now

It's nice to be able to sit back and imperiously command your console to hurry up with a game of tennis



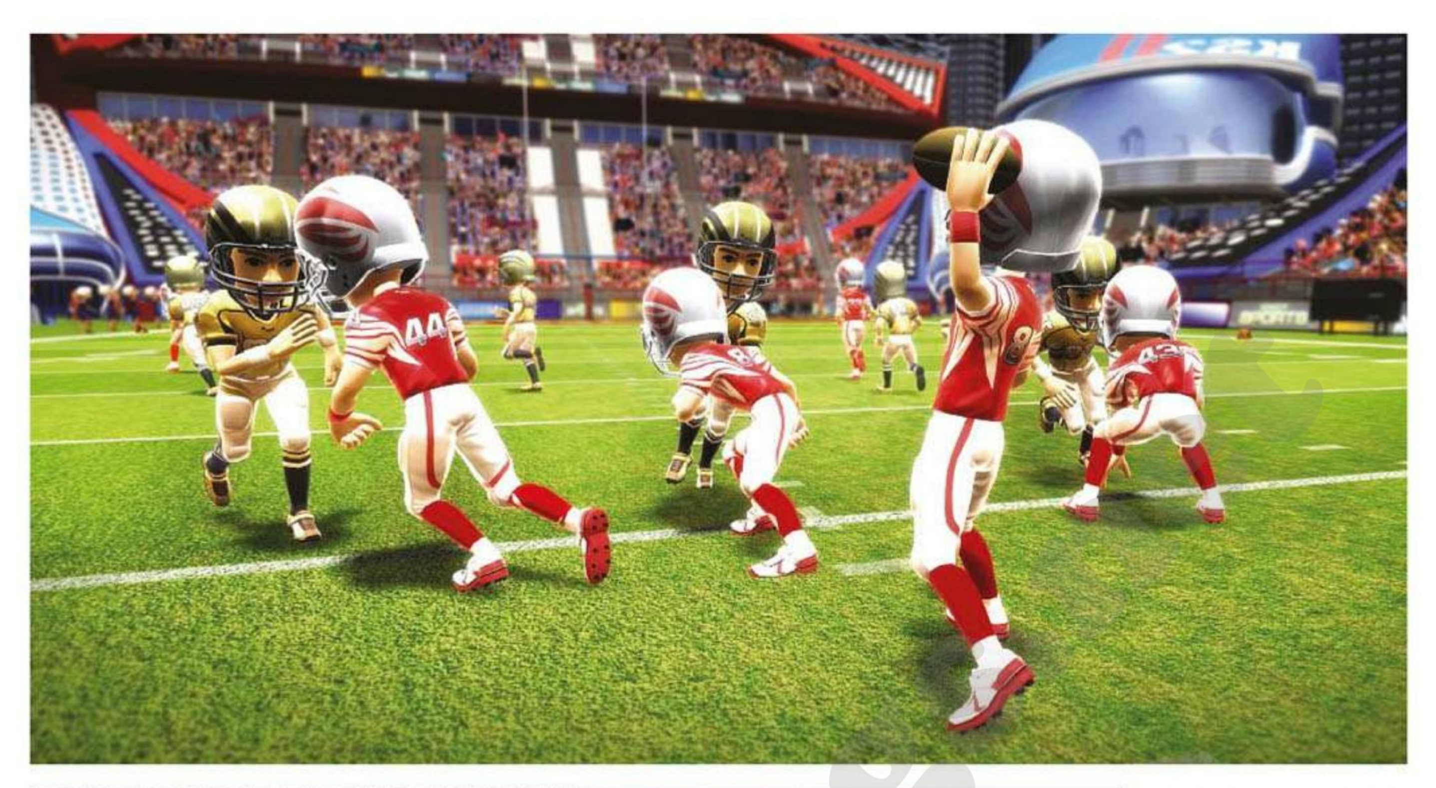
Neither sport, however, is without its problems – almost all of them due to the technology sitting underneath the television. Kinect ensures that baseball manages to fluff batting – surely something that should've been high on the list of must-get-it-right priorities – with noticeable lag and an awkward invisible avatar that makes judging the timing and angle of a swing unnecessarily troublesome. Football has its own motion-sensing irritations, struggling to correctly interpret left, right and straight passes during crucial plays, and sometimes gluing the ball to your hand while vital seconds tick away and the rival team powers ever closer.

Voice integration makes the leap to *Kinect Sports*' menus with this second instalment, and it's one of the motion-sensing peripheral's more welcome additions. The outstretched palm can make for a sluggish mouse pointer at times, so it's nice to be able to sit back and imperiously command your console to hurry up with a game of tennis. The spoken word occasionally crashes into games, too, a succession of "Hike!" shouts serving to put even the shyest of players into the end zone. It's another reminder that, where Kinect is concerned, the little ideas are often the best.

The minigames, tellingly, are often better than the main events themselves, with pleasing spins on the likes of target-practice golf and a simple darts maths challenge in which you complete a series of sums and then tag the correct answers on the board. The selection tends towards the predictable, and there are plenty of signs that the developers know their way around the App Store, too, with *Fruit Ninja*'s bombs bringing a little welcome chaos to the baseball diamond, while a field goal punting mode invokes memories of *Flick Kick Football* as you move around your target taking shots. There are several moments, however, where you glimpse what must be Rare's distinct sense of humour peeking through. A balloon-popping twist on circus knife-throwing has you narrowly avoiding the tender limbs of a bound mascot as it rotates on a wheel, while a feisty tennis aside keeps the torturing theme in play as you smack a series of bright rubber balls at mascots' heads.

There's a sparse but engaging asynchronous challenge mode available alongside both local and online multiplayer options for all sports, but Xbox Live activity for the game is already worryingly thin on the ground. That's not entirely surprising given the obvious couch-bound focus of this family package, but it still hints at a central problem with the whole production. Mildly charming but fiercely superficial, *Kinect Sports* remains undermined by the lingering inconsequentiality that tends to gather around all but the very best compilation titles.

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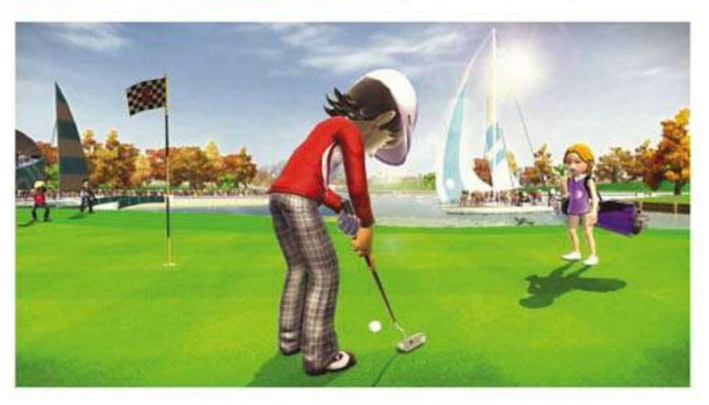


Kinect's take on American football refuses to ignore the sport's complexities, seeing them as an opportunity for different kinds of physical interaction. Darts, meanwhile, is a study in simplicity, with a little griefing thrown in

Golf is a delight, with stylish controls for viewing the course, a great sense of impact, and a kneeling manoeuvre that allows you to inspect the green



Expect some very strange animations as you head out on to the court for a spot of tennis. You can play the game while sitting down, incidentally, and it's worth trying out if only to witness the surreal visual response



Saints Row: The Third

Publisher THQ
Developer Volition Inc
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

Saints Row wants to be the *Wario Ware* of open-city games, and this may be no bad thing. While the giddy mayhem of early *GTA*s set the table for ostentatious crime drama, *Saints Row* trims as much context as possible from its carnage, becoming a cartoon flipbook of anything-goes extremity.

In its third outing, the game's titles have barely finished rolling before you're skydiving from an exploding plane. Tank missions, the traditional climax of *GTA* clones, arrive but half an hour later, and the game escalates with a breathless, puerile imagination so single-minded that it commands respect. Why have a simple speeding challenge when you can do it on fire or in the company of an ill-tempered tiger? Pyrotechnics that would be the concluding punctuation of any other game are little more than a footnote here; one all-out assault bundles hurriedly into the back of its predecessor, except this time the firefight takes place in freefall, or during a city-wide war, or on Mars.

Central missions are thematically varied yet proceed in a mostly linear fashion. A host of leering pop-culture references volley you between violent Japanese-inflected game shows, luchadore wrestling matches, pastiches of Tron, text adventures, zombie apocalypses and more. The game's obsessive spoofery is more often empty-headed than not, but there are well-placed gags and sharp writing in here too, and the voice cast gamely hams it up.

Yet the drive towards context-free rapid-fire frippery comes with a cost. The continual barrage desensitises you to the action, and the irreverence makes it all feel largely meaningless. In these circumstances, the thin mechanics of many of the game's devices fail to act as a satisfactory replacement. Combat often feels like a chore, as you agonisingly bleed wave upon wave of enemies. Even the most basic foes can sponge up entire SMG clips at point-blank range, impatiently nudging players toward the game's weapon-upgrade options. Late-game attempts to sabotage player control compound frustrations further. Enemies ram and stagger you while explosions send you reeling amid a blinding cats-cradle of laser fire. In an ill-advised zombie-themed vignette, your undead foes not only waylay you with QTEs and leave you teetering uncontrollably with an unending flurry of blows, but sometimes spontaneously combust, sending you into a protracted, helpless flailing animation, which too frequently ends with you reigniting and entering the cycle once more. You may as well put the pad down and make a cup of tea – before you fling it through the screen.

Helicopters, planes and vehicles handle without nuance, but for getting from A to B they're perfectly suitable. Even the humblest roadster can roar across the city in minutes, turn on a pin, and shriek to a full halt near instantaneously. The city itself lacks character – or doesn't encourage you to look for it – and outside of the main mission line, the game's diversions are little more than one-off gags. This flippant attitude allows the game a degree of slapdash silliness. Volition doesn't owe you a retro-styled videogame tank made of chunky green blocks, so who are you to complain that the model sometimes won't fit through your garage door? But the game's loose approach to design gets harder to forgive when a mission-critical character dies during a cutscene, or when your assassination target is rendered invulnerable by virtue of being stuck in a wall.

The game's loose approach to design gets harder to forgive when your target is rendered invulnerable



***Saints Row*'s weakest** parts are hand-me-downs from its *GTA* source text, uncomfortably echoing the squalid business of pimpin' and hustlin' in the form of a lame cartoon, a whooping fratboyish endorsement of crime and female degradation, devoid of any conscience or commentary. *GTA* takes pains to voice moral unease. In doing so it may not offer up reconciliation with the violent mechanics of the game, but the best solution to that dissonance cannot be to pitch the entire thing into a swamp of near-uniform toxicity.

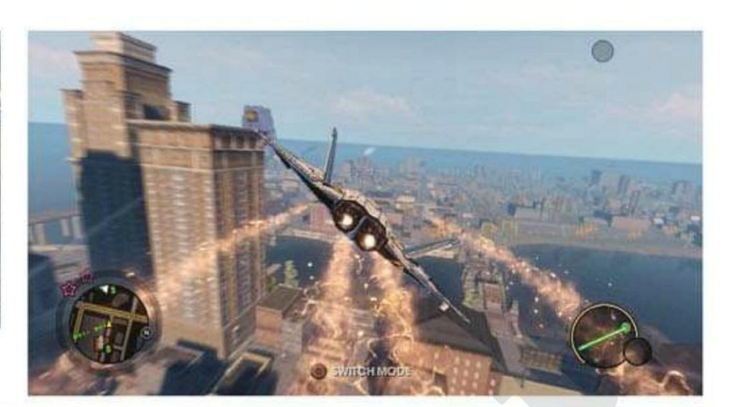
By the time you've ploughed through the mission in which you murder dozens of busty stripper assassins ('Trojan Whores'), dabbled with the option of slaughtering waves of sex workers ('Whored mode') or packed whimpering trafficked sex slaves from one container crate into another to either be sold back to their pimps at a premium or put to work in your own prostitution ring ('The Ho Boat') you might find the sheer amount of violent abuse of women reaches the point of being oppressive, a sensation so bleak that the taste has to be swilled out with back-to-back episodes of Adventure Time. Clearly it's possible to take dark themes and spin them into effective humour, but if there's a hilarious joke about sex trafficking to be told, then it's not found here. This representation serves no purpose other than shock value. We're not saying the creation of something in which women only exist to be sold, killed or fucked shouldn't be allowed, but what does it say for gaming as a type of entertainment?

The final third of the game abandons grubby criminality for altogether more lurid, excessive and enjoyably silly climes, testifying to the fact that *Saints Row* is at its best when it rejects the expectations of the series and the strictures of the *GTA* format. Such is the pace of its ever-amplifying procession of exploding pop-culture nonsense, cheek and charm that it almost covers for the failings of its basic action, which is by turns shallow and turgid. Ultimately, though, the streak of squalor that is parcelled with the game's gang-banging aesthetic can't help but sour what might otherwise have been a frivolous, disposable delight.

6



ABOVE While nearly every woman is in fishnets or a bikini, the men are hypersexualised too. This equal-opportunity smut doesn't really wash in the context of gaming's depressing record in the depiction of females







ABOVE Exchanging bullets is a bore, but the effort Volition has put into explosions pays off. The way plumes of violet flame billow out of the cartwheeling carcass of a truck never ceases to delight.
LEFT You can customise your character to absurd extremes from the start: we chose a withered, demonically red man, sporting a Renaissance-era tumble of white locks, a tiny curly moustache and a tux, naked from the waist down except for strappy blue high heels

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon Legacy

The recent console iteration of Namco Bandai's bombastic jet fighter combat series (see **E**234) saw the publisher take a sharp turn away from the sci-fi rowdiness of its heritage into more fashionable, *Call Of Duty*-inspired skies. For every newcomer lured in by its user-friendliness and Clancy-esque plotline, a long-time fan became disenchanted. *Legacy*, however, offers a halfway house between old and new, splicing together a classic *Ace Combat* storyline between fictional warring continents and a sense of control drawn from earlier entries in the series along with *Assault Horizon*'s Action Manoeuvre system to create a hybrid spinoff.

The broad design is familiar. You pilot a jet over sun-dappled oceans and snow-draped mountains in a series of short, sharp missions responding to the barked orders of your commanding officer. While you're a long way from *Microsoft Flight Simulator* here, you must pay basic attention or risk a stall as you throw your plane into cloud-kissing loops. The rhythm of play is frantic and exciting, offering scarcely enough time to notice the rudimentary textures as you weave through mountain ranges on bombing runs.

***Assault Horizon Legacy* is one of the few 3DS titles to draw substantial benefit from the use of 3D. The into-the-screen perspective is easy on the eyes, while the technology provides a convincing sense of depth**

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Project Aces
Format 3DS
Release Out now



THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY
The offensive Action Manoeuvre is joined by a defensive equivalent that puts your plane into a micro-cutscene in which you simultaneously avoid the chasing homing missile and somehow manoeuvre yourself behind the attacking plane. Project Aces here trades realism for instant thrills, but it is a shallow kind of excitement, appealing to our appreciation of spectacle rather than our mastery of technique.

The Action Manoeuvre system, the most controversial feature of the recent console title, is integrated here with simple style. While chasing an enemy fighter a gauge fills, eventually allowing you to take the plane into Dogfight mode. This momentarily wrests control away from you as the game repositions your plane behind the target for a simpler takedown. It's a voguish dumbing-down that makes the game too easy in the early stages, while in the second half of the game its mastery is essential to progression.

There is a robust, if unremarkable, metagame that has you earning money with which to purchase new planes and rocket types for your third, optional weapon slot. A gently branching mission structure provides a small incentive for replay, while the option to pay for wingmen to accompany you into tougher battles makes a return from earlier entries to the series.

With no multiplayer to speak of, however, *Legacy* is light not only on extras but also on a core component of the *Ace Combat* experience. Repetition is also an issue, Project Aces struggling to vary mission structure or purpose over the long haul. A hybrid game of mixed success, *Legacy* reconciles *Ace Combat*'s past and present while failing to offer enough diversity and features to make the results essential.

7





Diamond Trust Of London

A game of bluff and counter-bluff, of second- and third-guessing your opponent, *Diamond Trust Of London* is a surprising release from Jason Rohrer. It's a full retail release, for a start (if an unlikely one), from a man who usually sends titles straight into the public domain. More interestingly, though, is that *DTOL* is the gamiest game Rohrer has produced. This isn't a content-light think-piece or mechanical experiment. It's a game with a winner, a loser, and a long series of tactical decisions to establish who's which.

Fashioned like a boardgame, it sees players take the roles of competing banks. Each has three agents who can be sent on to the board – a representation of Angola, divided into six regions. Collecting diamonds involves paying local guides, and when two players end up in the same region, the highest bidder collects the reward. Money is limited enough that wasting it on failed bids can sting, so optimal play is about guessing your opponent's offer, and paying a single dollar more.

Added complexity – and a dose of cynicism – comes from bribes. If two opposing agents share a region, a player can bribe his opponent's agent to give away his movements. Bribed agents will in turn reveal any agents that they have turned, meaning that players become aware of which of their pieces are feeding back information to the opposing player. A bribable third party – a UN Inspector – adds a final layer. The winner is the player with the most gems at the end of the game.

That one game type and board make up the entirety of the game, and their lifespan depends on the skill of the players. Initially, being able to see your opponent's plans seems pointless: when both players know their agents are compromised, they'll feed disinformation on the first turn, wait for the bribed agent to report back, and then actually perform their desired move. But, gradually, players learn to take this into account, and find themselves reading between the lines of obvious feints, planning responses to phantom moves.

Playing against AI can throw up a challenge, but requires patience. Higher difficulties give the AI more time to think, but *DTOL*'s real problem is its interface. It's simple to the point of crudity, but functionally it can be opaque and cluttered, making a reasonably complex game seem even more so while you're figuring out the rules. Get past that, and there's an acute psychological game to be played in *DTOL*, but it'll require time – and an extra player – to find it.

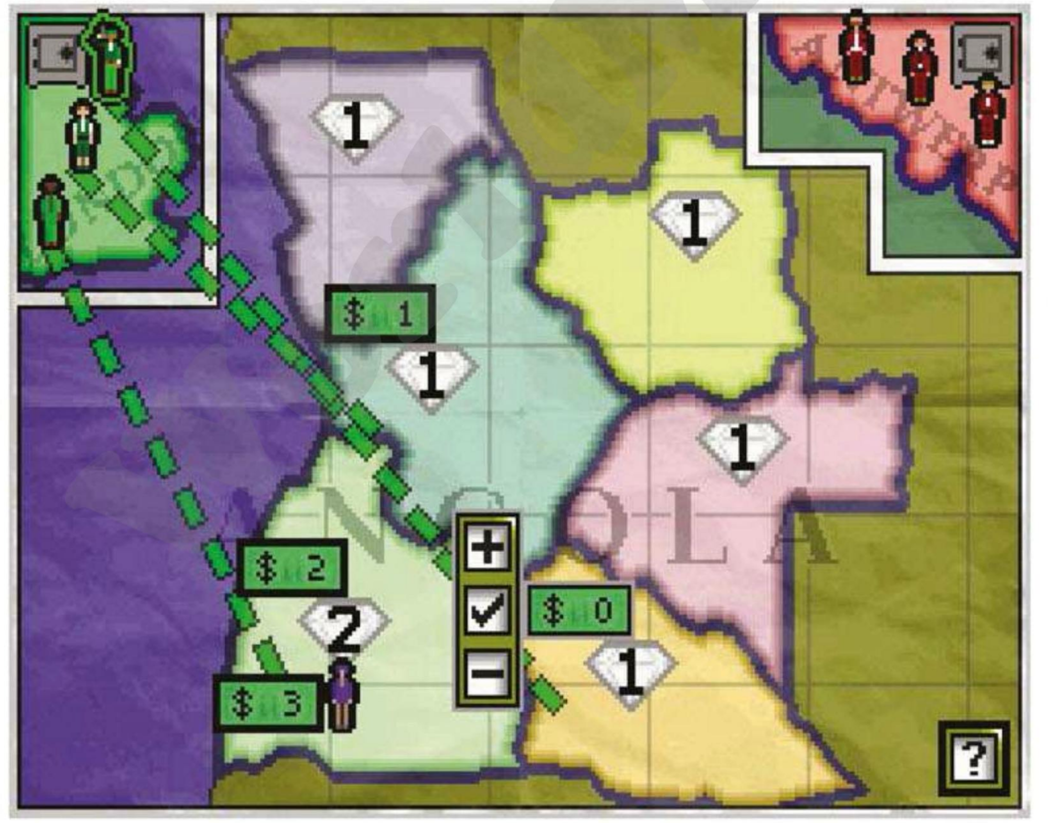
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Publisher IndiePub
Developer Jason Rohrer
Format DS
Release January

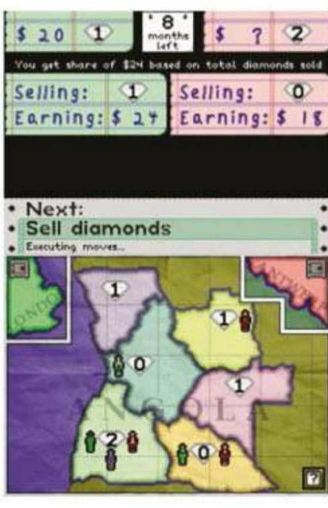


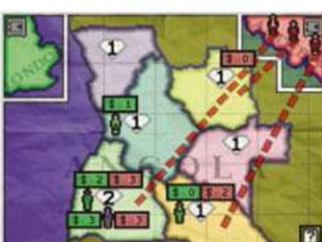
UNSPECTOR

The UN Inspector can be bribed in the same way as agents. For enough cash, they're in your pocket for a round. They can be sent to block your opponents from discovering diamonds, and will even confiscate gems from any agents they find. While *DTOL* isn't too preachy in its implied criticism of the diamond trade, the pliable official is a neat touch, as is the satellite image of the real Angola that appears over the board when you pause the game.



To bribe an agent, you must pay them more than their total salary up to the point of the bribe. You can buy back an agent by increasing his wages, or you could let him stay corrupt and feed false moves to the other player





Diamond selling splits a fixed pot of $24 between both players proportionally, depending on how many gems they offer up

Where Is My Heart?

Die Gute Fabrik's *Where Is My Heart?* begins with a simple premise. A family of monsters gets lost in the woods. You guide them through each stage, combining their powers to manoeuvre each monster to the exit. Sounds simple.

The game's challenge arises from the ways in which the developer skews perception, carving each stage into tiles and jumbling their position onscreen. Imagine a wall of surveillance-camera monitors observed through broken glass. You walk a monster off the left side of one tile, and she walks on to the right hand side of a different tile on the opposite side of the screen.

To help monsters to the exit, you must first put the stage together. Not actually, but conceptually. You accomplish this by experimentation, stepping a monster carefully out of one square to see where they appear. You must watch the trees and rainbows and clouds. You must piece it all together, and you must remember it.

It's an ordered chaos. More than simply a novel trick used to hide a generic platformer, the dissected screens are deliberately and expertly arranged to be just confusing enough without rendering the whole illegible. In later stages, you interact with the tiles directly. One monster's special ability allows it to fly outside of the tiles, rotate them around, and land on a different one in a different section of the stage.

A less skilled developer could easily abuse such a novel device, but the restrained, careful design of *Where Is My Heart?* ensures the game lasts just long enough to get the most out of its mechanic without succumbing to padding. In one stage you might go horizontally up the screen or vertically across; in another, the monsters bloat into bug-eyed versions of themselves.

Each stage feels vertiginous and unique. The pixel-art visuals of diluted tones and understated environments aren't stunning so much as soothing. Such a pragmatic choice ensures that the stages remain decipherable. Combined with the skeletal music of low-key hums and ambient cicada chirps, *Where Is My Heart?* paints a magical world before its tile-shifting mechanic rips the canvas to shreds.

Where Is My Heart? revels in simplicity, beauty and restraint, yet the experience tempers such qualities by proving challenging, infuriating and exhausting. Not unlike love itself. The straightforward is rendered complex; the infuriating overshadows the beautiful; and even when the solution is right in front of you, your inability to see straight renders it invisible. This is Die Gute Fabrik's ultimate success: *Where Is My Heart?* does not merely convey its theme through its style, it channels it through its play.

8

Publisher SCE
Developer Die Gute Fabrik
Format PS3
Release Out now



TRUE STORY
Where Is My Heart? came about through its maker's attempt to understand his own family. Developer Bernie Schulenburg has explained that the game was inspired by an experience in which he got lost in a forest with his parents while on a hike. His father would get anxious and switch into "bossy mode" while his mother would turn to "lamenting about her life" and Schulenburg himself "fell into patterns of regret, remorse and disconnectedness".

To guide the family safely through each stage, the player must first figure out what that stage looks like. By moving the monsters and tracing the environment between the tiles, how they fit together slowly emerges



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

In kicking off this edition's People, Places, Things we meet Jason Rohrer, the independent game developer and advocate of simple living whose quirky titles have won him the hearts of many gamers. He explains the philosophy behind his work on p146. Living is slightly less simple aboard the USG Ishimura, setting for *Dead Space* and home to some particularly unpleasant specimens. We stalk its corridors on p148. Taking a breather on p150, we look at idle animations, from Sonic's foot-tapping to Sam Gideon's nicotine habit. Aardman Animations, home of Wallace and Gromit and Morph, is never idle, and for Studio Profile on p152 we travel to Bristol to see how its gaming wing, Aardman Digital, is striving to bring its familiar characters to videogames. The subject of this issue's The Making Of... on p156 is *Alan Wake*, the game that features a tweedy writer who turns out to be pretty handy with a gun. Wake's adventure wouldn't be possible without a 3D engine, and on p160 we look at today's most popular examples, discovering what their creators have planned for the future. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p164) daring to mention a certain 'A' word, LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p166) inventing basketball, Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p168) bringing light to the darkness of Mars, and writer James Leach (p170) gently sobbing somewhere near Andover after a meeting with developers to discuss a new breed of MMORPG.



www.bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



The orange-skinned Morph (pictured next to his badly behaved pal, Chas) was created by Aardman for the BBC, and first appeared in 1977. On p148 we talk to staff at the Bristol studio about their videogame ambitions



People

JASON ROHRER

The ruler of the art-game development scene has loftier ambitions

It was dropping out of grad school to work on his own projects that saw Rohrer take his first steps toward being an indie dev

Simon Law

For a man committed to simple living – "I just have three shirts and wash them by hand," **Jason Rohrer** tells us – the poster-child of a generation of indie game designers has a background that seems far from humble.

"My parents were business owners," he explains. "They owned a printing company. When you buy batteries and they're in a plastic bubble that you tear off, they made those cards and they make those bubbles." Rohrer's was a household that wanted for nothing, a crucial factor in moulding the mindset that would later define his games in both theme and no-frills production values. "When I came to my own life and started thinking about what really mattered to me, I'd seen very clearly that money and material possessions don't lead to happiness because my father just had a somewhat depressed personality generally, that was just his makeup, and as much as he'd chase after the next thing he wanted to buy he was never happy, so I knew that that wasn't going to make me happy," he says. "So even in college I started thinking about being inspired by people who've gone off the rails."

Before taking a leap off the rails himself, Rohrer played the education game. "I'm not one of those kids who grew up programming, like a lot of people I know [who] were hobbyist programmers. So I went to study computer science at Cornell and that's the first time I ever really learned to program, in my classes there." Alongside computer science, Rohrer minored in psychology and "dabbled in some senior-level philosophy classes," a study that would influence later works ("that's where ideas for games like *Between* came from," he says).

"I'm trying to find my own way. Basically, every game I make is launching off in a new direction"

Dropping out of graduate school to work on peer-to-peer projects, however, was Rohrer's first free-spirited move toward making a name for himself. It was his success in this world that gave him the boost he needed to make the leap to independent videogame production: "After programming for like eight years, I was like: 'Maybe I can make a game now.'"

And make a game Rohrer did. Several, in fact, over a period of six short years (with his latest release, *Diamond Trust Of London*, reviewed on p139), exploring territory from multimedia art (with 2D blaster *Transcend*) to storytelling and communication. It's perhaps *Sleep Is Death* that has made the biggest waves for Rohrer's career and profile. A hybrid of co-operative and competitive online experience, in which one participant plays realtime storywriter and the other is a character in the progressive narrative, the game challenges the norms of multiplayer gaming and touches, however lightly, on metathemes of control and the restrictions imposed on players. It was a project that spawned from Rohrer's issues with modern experimentation in games – or, rather, the lack of it. "With an interactive medium, and not necessarily talking about games, then you've at least got to be making things about areas of life or things you want to express that are fundamentally interactive. And so that was what motivated me to make *Sleep Is Death* – I was frustrated," he says. "What's the most interactive thing in our lives? The people around us, and the most interactive experience we have is conversation. And yet we really can't make games about that – not in a satisfying way – [so] that was the impetus for *Sleep Is Death*. I want to make games about these situations that involve a lot of conversation, involve phone calls, involve arguments – that's a really interesting thing. And the only way I could see to do it without waiting 20 years for AI to catch up was to stick another person in there." Rohrer's work has been both the launchpad and focal point of discussions regarding videogames' cultural relevance and ability to transcend traditional themes.

Rohrer's work divides critics and fans alike with its avant-garde approach, and the creator's own relationship with his own back catalogue is one of love and hate. "I definitely look back at my own work and question it. I'm not ashamed of these things," he says. "Over the years as I've given different talks I'm sometimes even contradicting myself, saying we should be doing this, definitely, and then coming back and saying we shouldn't be doing that any more. These are hard problems… Basically, every game I make is launching off in a new direction."

If he sounds like a champion of the people, Rohrer is adamant that he was coding on a purely personal level, with little regard for a following or fandom. "Initially, with stuff like *Passage* or *Cultivation*, things like that, I guess I wasn't really thinking about audience, I didn't really know who would be the audience because I wasn't in touch with people who were in the game world at all," he explains. "So [I was] just kind of making something and sending it off to these festivals and seeing what happened."

It's been Rohrer's nonconformist attitude that's been the key to heightening his profile, and he's aware of that paradox. "It's sort of like, what does the game industry need? From a business perspective it's like a blue-ocean strategy, because I'm somewhat reasonably commercially successful, but it's because I'm doing something totally different from everyone else. If I had just tried to make a firstperson shooter or something, or even tried to climb my way up through the rungs of the studio system starting off as a low-level programmer, would I be giving a keynote at the Montreal Game Summit four years later? No."

Even grassroots living has pressures, however, and Rohrer is now more open than ever to commercial options and avenues. "It's curious. I guess more recently I have been thinking about audience more because my family is under more financial pressure." And yet he's keen to maintain the artistic streak. "At the same time [I want] to balance that with something that I think is worth doing, and doing what I want to do artistically."

With a portfolio of work that values the experimental over the superficial, it's jarring to find Rohrer taking cues from a supremely egotistical and extravagant musician when discussing his legacy. "My personal goal now, after listening to Lil' Wayne [and] how bombastic he is about himself – I don't think I'm there yet – but you know my goal, in general, is to be the greatest game designer of all time. That's my goal. If that's not your goal then what are you doing? If you're not trying to be the best that you can be and push yourself to the very limit then you're just settling for second best." Rohrer, it seems, is proof that the simple life can be ambitious, too. ■

CV

URL www.hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/jason-rohrer
Softography *Transcend, Cultivation, Passage, Gravitation, Between, Primrose, Sleep Is Death, Inside A Star-filled Sky, Diamond Trust Of London*





Places

THE USG ISHIMURA

A space-bound tomb that rivals the best Hollywood has to offer

On an industrial craft, space comes at a premium. As such, despite the USG Ishimura's scale, players spend most of their time moving through dark, cramped corridors

From Dead Space series
Developer Visceral Games
Origin US
Release 2008

You've seen it all before, of course. A small rescue team is sent to assess a mining vessel that has gone dark while orbiting a planet, just after it sent out fragmented reports detailing the discovery of an artefact of unknown origin. *Dead Space* thrusts its reluctant hero Isaac Clarke into a wanton medley of sci-fi references and cliché, but much more than that, it's a love letter to genre fans raised on hulking spaceships and the isolation of deep space.

At the centre of this roleplaying wish fulfilment lies the USG Ishimura, the deep-space mining starship – colloquially referred to as a 'planet cracker' – on which the horror unfolds. Responding to a distress call, you and your team approach the now-silent behemoth in another ship – the game affording you a few brief seconds to take in the Ishimura in its entirety – before, as tradition dictates, your ride home is scuppered on the docking bay floor after a crash landing. Bathed in foreboding disquiet, you take your first steps into Visceral Games' playground, nervous but nonetheless *itching* to explore this place.



No examination of the Ishimura would be complete without mention of its audio. The thumping mechanical heartbeat of the ship, combined with its occupants' chilling wails, creates one of the most oppressive game atmospheres of modern times

Like the best examples of spacecraft found in the films to which Visceral is clearly in thrall, from the Nostromo to Icarus II, the USG Ishimura is utilitarian in design and believably functional. Claustrophobic corridors cut direct lines through the ship's belly connecting industrial workspaces, medical bays and modest living quarters, while incidental details like abandoned photo frames and health-and-safety videos stuck in an endless, echoing loop hint at the crew's activities before your arrival.

The constituent parts seem prosaic on paper, but it's this pervasive sense of the everyday – albeit transposed well beyond our own domestic frame of reference – that provides such an effective and jarring contrast to the caterwauling, flailing necromorphs that have populated the ship.

Space is used as an impenetrable boundary, keeping you trapped in your grim fight for survival

And once you're forced to fight off waves of these horrors, spaces that appeared to favour austere practicality over gameplay possibilities are revealed as perfectly judged arenas, providing just enough obstacles to strategically retreat (read: cower) behind. But keeping your back against the wall in these fraught encounters provides little comfort, thanks to the presence of another unassuming environmental detail: vents.

Commonly used as a way to gain the upper hand in other games (or at the very least overhear NPCs discussing your deeds), vents and ducts are turned against the player on the Ishimura. Necromorphs scuttle about in the pipework behind the walls, leaping in and out of view as they attempt to get behind, and ultimately overwhelm, you. The effect is unsettling and disorienting, as Visceral's designers gleefully sabotage your best-laid plans. And, since almost every location on the ship is ventilated, it's impossible to relax in all but a few areas – riding a tram to a new deck, for instance, or clambering into one of the ship's automated stores, safe in the knowledge that there will be no surprises until you re-emerge.

Such moments are rare, however. Inventory management is an essential component of any survival horror game, but where this would normally involve pausing and calmly selecting the green herb, *Dead Space* affords players no such respite. The integration of your HUD into the gameworld means you are never wrenched from the Ishimura; throughout your journey, you are always there.

Visceral hammers home your isolation through the inclusion of depressurised spaces, leaving you with nothing but the muffled rumbles and creaks of a damaged hull and the sound of your own ever-more-rasping breath. Space is used, like in so much sci-fi horror, as an impenetrable boundary keeping you trapped in your grim fight for survival. Claustrophobia floods your mind in a delirious rush as you're reminded both of your fragility and the futility of your actions so far from safety.

Titan Station, or 'The Sprawl' – the civilian space station in which *Dead Space*'s sequel takes place – offers much of the oppression and many of the same design cues as the Ishimura but can't match the planet cracker's overall coherence – the sense that Necromorphs continue to skitter through corridors on decks above and below you as you build a mental map of the ship's geometry.

But Visceral's real masterstroke is to send Clarke back in to the Ishimura, docked at Titan Station following a government clean-up operation, in *Dead Space 2*'s final act. Entering through the same bay, memories of your previous visit come rushing back. Now the Ishimura transcends its status as a game environment. It's a place you never thought you'd have to revisit, crippling emotional attachments presenting a tacit threat of what is to come.

Past events and the clean-up have further darkened its character, too. Stripped of power, the interiors are lit with fluorescent lamps which illuminate the clinical plastic sheeting secured to every wall with thick red tape. Protective tubes guide you through familiar corridors.

For a long time, crucially, nothing really happens. So potent and foreboding is the Ishimura that there's no need for exposition, puzzles or fighting. It's a brave sequence to slot into a game driven by action set-pieces, and it only succeeds thanks to the intense sense of place cultivated in the original game. In the Ishimura, Visceral Games not only delivered to us a convincing spacecraft, but also our worst – and most longed-for – nightmares. ■

Things

IDLE ANIMATIONS

The deceptively complex process of just standing around



Hard to draw, maybe, but harder to 'get right'? At least the sprite-based idles of Sonic enjoyed the luxuries of a fixed camera

There's a lot of work involved in standing around doing nothing. Responsibility, too. People fixate upon the more flamboyant elements of character animation: facial performance capture, martial arts, military tactics, bicycle kicks, slam dunks… but it's the little things that often stand out. Sam Gideon smoking a quick one in *Vanquish*, a guard going down with a cold in *Metal Gear Solid*, or a cop being abused by a fly in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. From *Sonic*, *Mario* and *ToeJam & Earl*, to the pedestrian parade of *Skyrim*, the idle animation is the unsung hero of videogame performance.

"Idle animations are important because they serve as a common position for all other motions to come from and go to," says **Jon Maine**, animation director at Avalanche Studios. "An idle can help to marry the character with their environment and therefore convince the player that the character exists in the world, so it's important to invest time in getting them right."

The enemy of animators creating idles is repetition, especially when dealing with the 'core' idles that loop whenever there's nothing going on. "If a character were to scratch his nose during a default idle then it'll keep happening and break the believability of the character," Maine notes. "Save this sort of thing for the idle variants that should be used sporadically – like looking around or checking your weapon."

It's just this sort of thing that crops up when we ask **Mick Morris**, managing director at mo-cap specialist Audiomotion, to check through the shot list for an upcoming game. "'Gun.' 'Check gun.' 'Idle check, look around,'" he mutters. "'Shuffles.' 'Heavy breaths.' 'Disappointment…' You get a lot of emotions. Even if you're not trying to capture facial expressions, you're trying to capture the essence with the body. This is something I wouldn't have paid much attention to, but when you go through the list you find that the animation director's put all this down because it's clearly as important as all the action stuff. 'Nervous looks.' 'Minor reactions.' 'Looking off-cam.' These are all things the performer's going to have to get across in their body language."

> "Even if you're not capturing facial expressions, you're trying to capture the essence with the body"

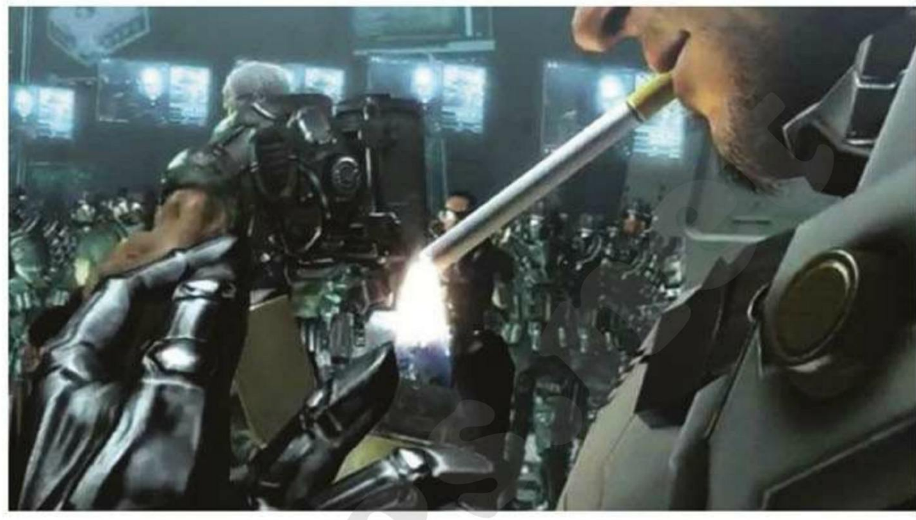
A layman would be forgiven for thinking that idles are some of the cheaper and simpler things on a motion-capture checklist – a bit like when someone who isn't Mel Gibson has their hands filmed disarming a bomb because Gibson's too busy speaking to a real police officer. But there's an art to it. "We recently had four Navy SEALs over from the US for a two-week shoot," Morris recalls. "If you want these guys to do any particular military moves – clear a room, take cover, anything like that – then that's all fine. But getting them to give you those little, subtle nuances, those tiny little gestures, is probably where they'd struggle. A traditional actor is going to convey those much better, without the director going: 'Let's go again. Let's go again.'

"There's something I remember watching a while ago where Michael Caine's giving an acting masterclass – this was about 30 years old. There's an anecdote about Jack Lemmon being directed for a particular scene. The director says, 'Let's go again, Jack, but less. *Less.*' Lemmon does the scene again and the director says, 'OK, Jack, that's good. But *less.*' And Jack Lemmon turns around and says, 'Look, if I do anything less then I won't be doing anything at all.' And the director says, '*Now* you've got it.' Direction is a craft, and you wouldn't pick up on those silences and moments where it appears there's nothing going on. And it's relevant to videogames. These characters aren't just standing around doing nothing, they're doing *something* – they just appear to not be doing anything important."

"I personally try and stay away from the 'heavy breathing' idles that we're used to seeing on more exaggerated or cartoony games," Maine says. "There's a fine balance between too much and too little, and it's important to consider the size and resolution of the character in-game when capturing these motions. If there isn't enough movement, the character can appear frozen like a statue, especially if the camera is farther away. If the motion is too exaggerated then it can appear forced and unnatural."

The process isn't a hundred miles away from Michael Caine's stomping ground. There's a method to it, and the director's role is just as important in ensuring that the actor isn't just reading the script, but 'getting' it. And when it comes to idles, of course, much of the time there's no script at all. "It's important to invest time explaining the situation to the actor and providing an understanding of where the motion is used," Maine says. "It often helps to build up a motion in order to achieve the desired effect. If you need your character to look out of breath, ask the actor to perform runs and sprints first. Or if you want the character to look energised, ask the actor to perform something like a punch and kick combo prior to capturing the idle.

"A more current approach towards characters idling is to provide a series of motions that can dynamically affect a single pose. This can be achieved via the use of additive layers coupled with blending, which provide more variety in the motions for less memory usage. An example of this would be to combine a subtle, relaxed animation with an out-of-breath version, then blend between the two states depending on how much time the character has spent running." ■



Though Platinum Games' 2010 shooter *Vanquish* is an experience filled with moments of epic action, the small details and animations involving action man Sam Gideon give a sense of character beyond his heavily emphasised physical excesses

STUDIO PROFILE

Aardman Digital

From Plasticine to pixels: the interactive ambitions of an extraordinary animation house

1 The farmyard-based cast of Shaun The Sheep. **2** Chas and Morph, two original faces of Aardman. **3** WebbliWorld, a child-safe online gaming hub. **4** *Webbli Racers*, a WebbliWorld attraction. **5** Avatars for Aardman's project with the Tate

Aardman

Founded 1972 (digital division: 2007)
Employees 25
Key staff Lorna Probert (head of digital), Karen Heldoorn (head of client services), Dan Efergan (creative director – digital), Richard Davey (technical director – digital), Katie McQuin-Roberts (online community manager)
URL www.aardman.com/digital
Selected softography *Wallace & Gromit's World Of Invention, Championsheeps, Something Special Out And About, Deadly Planet*, Tate Movie Project
Current projects *Home Sheep Home 2*

You might expect Aardman's headquarters to be more in keeping with the quaint British idiom of its animations – some sort of cobblestone-and-thatch structure, maybe, cluttered with eccentric machines and questionable taxidermy, topped with a giant tea-cosy. Instead, its offices are rather more dazzling – the sheer glass frontage gives way to a long, multi-level hall of wood and metal, which towers and tapers away. It's like an Imperial Star Destroyer made out of negative space, and full of the most wonderful toys. A life-size Wallace and Gromit sit watching a showreel of Aardman's recent efforts in the lobby. Not far behind, Morph poses by a cabinet full of hand-painted vinyl figurines, holding a sign encouraging members of staff to make a donation to charity. Shaun The Sheep flanks the stairs, while Wallace's sinister nemesis, the penguin, can be spotted lurking in a corner, wielding some sort of remote control.

These are just some the icons which have solidified Aardman's reputation as Britain's most brilliant animation studio, and assured it a place of reverence in the memories of many a childhood, not least our own. But we are here for quite another reason. Although famed for its films, TV shows and commercials, Aardman has recently bolstered these efforts with a canny digital strategy, building Web communities and games to promote its products elsewhere. With the launch of puzzle game *Home Sheep Home 2* in November, the company's Aardman Digital development arm has passed a watershed: for the first time, it has released a game not as a piece of complementary publicity but as a saleable product in its own right.

> Wallace's sinister nemesis, the penguin, can be spotted lurking in a corner, wielding a remote control

This is almost certainly just the beginning. Aardman Digital already has its own internally developed unique IP under way, and an assured success for *HSH2* will pave the way to ever greater resources and more substantial projects. With the colossal weight of Aardman's much-adored brands behind it, not to mention its excess of creative talent, the company is likely to soon become as significant a name in gaming as it is already in films and TV. And it has the calibre of backers to match: *Home Sheep Home 2* is published on mobile by Chillingo, a company which has already seen no little success with *Angry Birds* and *Cut The Rope*.

Aardman was founded in 1972; its Digital wing in 2007. A wall of staff photographs shows the company's rapid growth from tiny animation studio to multimedia behemoth, comprised of five well-defined but closely cooperating departments. We ask Digital's creative director **Dan Efergan** to break it down for us.

"There are the broadcast guys making stuff for TV," he says, "there are the film people, the rights people, who deal with everything from fluffy toys to boardgames and licensing stuff, and the commercials department which creates TV ads and branded content for people. Although everyone knows us from the feature films, and Wallace & Gromit and all that large-scale stuff, the backbone of the company has been the commercials. It started as an animation house for making commercials and still makes between 50 and 80 commercials a year. And that's what keeps Aardman happy and excitable."

While the commercials department is a purely work-for-hire animation house, Aardman has no shortage of people developing its own valuable IP within the broadcast and film departments. "We in the Digital department are a weird amalgamation of the two," Efergan says. "We started out as a service to the rest of Aardman, but quickly became much like a digital agency. Like the commercials department, people come to us and say: 'We trust that you can make great animation; we hope you can make great digital stuff'. And we've proved ourselves through doing that."

The Digital department is a small, but evidently busy, team of people. It has eight to ten projects running at any one time, a mixture of large and small, product and service, social platform and game – and everything in between. Currently, it does a great deal of work for the BBC, establishing child-friendly Internet hubs for CBeebies, educational games for Bitesize and making tie-in Web games for the likes of wildlife presenter Steve Backshall.





Creative director Dan Efergan and digital producer Jemma Kamara helm Aardman Digital's team, which employs in the region of 25 developers, animators and community managers

"Something Special is a project we launched just a couple of weeks ago for special-needs children," says digital producer **Jemma Kamara**, describing another BBC-funded project. "It's a suite of games and interactive content that can be modified for their needs and input devices."

"It's a very interesting project," Efergan says. "It does very little, but in a multitude of ways. You can bring the viewing all the way back down to black-and-white, or single line, and you can switch the animation on and off."

"We had a story where this teacher had rigged up a Webcam and projected the suite on to the ceiling," Kamara continues. "The kids that couldn't hold their own body weight up could lie on the ground and still play the games."

While there's no intention to cease work for external companies, the phenomenal success of the original *Home Sheep Home*, a free Web game, has earned Aardman Digital the right to originate game ideas. Though conceived as a tie-in to promote a new series of Shaun The Sheep airing on CBBC, it was no mere bit of marketing fluff. It was a short-play puzzle game with a rare degree of wit, smarts and craft to match the allure of its brand – and all made in the space of three weeks. To date, it's had something in the region of 105 million plays – a figure that continues to rise as it launches in other languages.

"With *Home Sheep Home 2*," Efergan says, "we're getting to a place where we are trusted internally, and we have a good enough team that we can build our own content. We've done bits and pieces before, but this feels like the first real product we've created where the whole of Aardman has got behind it. It feels like it's come from the core of Aardman, not just a peripheral thing. From the beginning everyone – the creator of the [Shaun The Sheep] TV show to the heads of the department – have wanted to make this, and wanted to make it to the same level of quality as we make all our other stuff."





Home Sheep Home 2 (above) has its challenge deftly set by the Aardman team (left), the complexity of its puzzles offset by the ability to solve them through experimentation and intuition. Special mention must also be made for the game's relentless deluge of puns

Although Digital has gained greater autonomy, Aardman is understandably careful with its much-loved properties like Shaun The Sheep, and the game's development has seen input from the character's creator, Aardman stalwart Richard 'Golly' Goleszowski. But the sense is not one of dictatorial control so much as close collaboration.

"It's a very flat company," Efergan says. "The people who officially have authority over us are the friends who wander in and get overly excited by this stuff as well. Everyone's just trying to get things happening. This building's meant to be designed so that as you travel from canteens and bathrooms, you can't help but see into each other's rooms and bump into other people."

With Goleszowski's input, the team decided to pursue a new aesthetic for Shaun The Sheep, normally seen in claymation 3D but here given a heavily textured, hand-drawn look. Not all of his ideas have made it into the final product, however, as Kamara recalls: "Golly really wanted to do something where you'd squeeze one of the sheep and poo would come out." Nonetheless, his contributions ensure that both *HSH* and its sequel are seeded with that cleverly cross-generational Aardman wit: the innocuous slapstick matched with an undercurrent of something rather sharper, as Shaun and company traverse the perils of a kebab house, or discover Margaret Thatcher's wig in a secret attic space.

> "Golly really wanted to do something where you'd squeeze a sheep and poo would come out"

No doubt it's partly because of Aardman's ability to straddle demographics that *Home Sheep Home* was played by such a vast number of people. Another factor, clearly, is that it was free. Now Aardman is faced with selling the sequel, just how has it wrangled issues like price points, playerbases and platforms?

"We're trying to put it anywhere we can," Kamara says. "We're starting with a Web game, which is the smaller version: one episode, with not many frills. Just the core 15 levels. And then that will hopefully advertise iOS and Steam and any other PC download versions, and then people will go off and buy the full version which has all the bells and whistles and achievements."

The downloadable desktop version will be in full-screen resolution, with three episodes, a substantial amount of bonus content and a developer's commentary. But the price of the game will vary on each platform. At the time of writing, very close to the predicted launch, the exact sums are still unknown. We ask Efergan if there's a risk that PC customers will resent paying more than their smartphone-wielding counterparts, or whether the Web game will cultivate expectation that the whole thing will be free

"It seems counterintuitive to be giving away part of a game you're also trying to sell," he says. "But the crossover between all those audiences seems reasonably minimal. And we strongly believe you'll have enough fun playing it online that people will want access to the rest. It's a strange business, but we're going to learn a lot. We're trying a lot of routes, and we might not try as many next time, because we will know which ones work."

Interestingly, one route Aardman Digital won't be trying for this game is Facebook. Efergan explains: "The core demographic of Shaun The Sheep's TV show is seven to 11. Facebook is a 13-plus environment. So we've got to be responsible and cautious. It's getting a bit ridiculous because every company knows there are under-13s on that space. Something's broken in the system – it feels a more dangerous situation than creating a safe space for under-13s to be on Facebook. But our responsibility is such that we shouldn't be seen to be active there. *HSH2* is such a wide demographic that we will support the brand on Facebook, but the game itself won't be on there."

But that's not to say Aardman Digital won't ever dally with the likes of Facebook. In fact, it seems something of a natural step given the company's experience with building social platforms, not to mention the many millions of Facebook fans who have already registered their support for Aardman's characters.

As for Aardman Digital's efforts in developing its own IP, "ideas have been forming," Efergan says. "We've got R&D time we're meant to be taking, but the problem is we're very, very busy. But luckily we did get some in at the beginning of the year, and an idea has formed for a unique IP that we're just getting a little bit further. That's still in the design document stage, and we're just seeing how we can get it to work and take off. It's obviously a very involved process developing an IP within Aardman, because though you might come up with a great idea for a game, anything that comes out of Aardman needs to be ready for the cuddly toys and so on as well. We think about IP strongly, and we want to make sure everything's tight and will work across everything."

Yet, however successful *HSH2* and any subsequent game projects are, Efergan doesn't think Aardman Digital will find itself focusing on them exclusively. "I think if we became a games department instead of a digital department we would have failed Aardman somewhat," he says. "We still need to be all about building up communities and entertaining those communities and creating entertaining products. Games are a part of that, but not all of it. I like to think *HSH2* might be so successful that we could open another department alongside this one dedicated to making games. But that'd be a bit sad because everyone would want to work there as well!"

Efergan concludes that the department will try to remain as integrated as possible. It makes sense, he says, given the increasingly fuzzy distinction between game, Web site and social experience, that Aardman Digital cultivates its unusual ability to deliver all three. It's all quite removed from the firm's early days animating pigs to extoll the virtues of electric showers, but the catchphrases seem as relevant as ever: "What they can do with technology today!" ■



Rich Davey
Technical director

Chris Underwood
Lead developer



The fundamentals of *Home Sheep Home* remain in the sequel – each stage is a single-screen challenge, presented in a papery, sketchy 2D. The player must get Shaun, Shirley and Timmy from one side of the screen to the other, using their different abilities to solve puzzles along the way. We talk to Aardman Digital's technical director, **Rich Davey**, and the game's lead developer, **Chris Underwood**, about the technical challenges of putting it together.

How long has *HSH2* been in development?
CU We started in February and worked straight through it in one go. It doesn't always work that way – sometimes we do a bit of concept work up front and then have some breathing space. But this one was all one big chunk.

How much of a departure is that from the original game's development ?
CU That was built over three weeks. It contained something like 15 levels, of which four or five towards the end are the really puzzley ones – that's where the meat of it is. The new game contains, I think, 64 levels. There's three shortish training levels, then three whole episodes of 15 levels each, each with its own setting, and there are bonus levels that sit on top of that and loads of other features we've added in as well. So in terms of scale it's a factor of ten bigger, perhaps.

Though this is still a Flash-based game, were you able to do anything with the additional resources available to you?
CU Well, during this project Adobe released AIR 3 [a runtime that enables developers to deploy standalone applications built in Flash, rather than via a browser plugin]. They've given us the technology to package up the AIR runtime so the user doesn't have to install it separately. It's a really big thing for users – it makes it seamless.
RD It's a big thing for us, too. You just get an exe, you double-click it, and you're playing the game. We couldn't really do that before without hacking all sorts of nasty projectors and stuff.
CU Having AIR as a separate download and install and *then* installing the game just isn't really acceptable for the user. So this captive runtime stuff is brilliant. It's been a little bit scary because all the way through the project this technology has been in beta. It was only released October 3, so we've been trusting that they were going to get it to work all the way through. It's was quite difficult to make some of the earlier beta stuff work the way it was supposed to, but actually they've delivered everything they said they would. It works really well. The other really big thing they've delivered is GPU support, so some of the game can run on your graphics card rather than through the CPU, which means on suitable computers it can run really well in huge resolutions.





Aardman's new HQ on Spike Island (named after the prison that once stood there) is one of several sites across Bristol – the others housing various film sets



THE MAKING OF…

Alan Wake

Remedy's game took five years to emerge from the darkness of development. The studio explains how it finally saw the light

Thoughtful and morose, Wake is an unusual choice for a game protagonist

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Remedy Entertainment
Format 360
Origin Finland
Release 2010

When **Sam Lake** was a kid, he spent his summer holidays on an apple farm in Raasepori in the south of Finland. One day, while exploring the rundown outbuildings, he stumbled across a treasure trove of junk. Among it was an old light switch. He called it his "clicker".

"To me, stuff like that always felt particularly mysterious and magical," the 41-year-old creative director tells us. "I love old rusted machine parts that you can't quite figure out, old telephones and radios." The switch became one of his favourite toys, a magical totem with secret powers.

It wasn't until the little boy grew up and became the lead writer at Finnish videogame developer Remedy Entertainment that he realised what the clicker was really for. In *Alan Wake* – a game about a horror novelist's attempts to save his wife from a supernatural power – the clicker becomes a metaphor. Terrorised by an evil force using his own fiction against him, Wake is trapped between waking reality and nightmare.

"A light switch felt like the perfect symbol," Lake explains. "In Alan Wake's world, the monsters that your imagination conjures up in the dark come true, but they are still destroyed when the lights are turned on. Darkness equals madness and terror, nightmares and death; light equals sanity and safety." The clicker had revealed its true power.

"In Alan Wake's world, the monsters that your imagination conjures up in the dark come true"

"Follow the light" is the most basic instruction in *Alan Wake*. When Wake's wife disappears, the player goes on a terrifying journey to rescue her. Wandering through dark, empty forests, deserted saw mills and creepy diners, you encounter the Taken – possessed townsfolk who inhabit the shadows and can only be banished by light – flashlights, flares and the odd UV spotlight.

"Lighting is probably the most important technical aspect in *Alan Wake*," says **Oskari Häkkinen**, Remedy's head of franchise development. "Light is a weapon but it's also thematically important throughout the game. We wanted the player to really feel different emotions depending on the amount of light that was present – safety, fear, insecurity, resolution – and to have the feeling of being either totally lost or having a sense of direction by following light. There are so many layers to it that there weren't any off-the-shelf solutions for the lighting. Building the tech allowed us to fulfil the creative vision."

For Remedy, journeying into the light wasn't simple. Development took five years, with more twists and turns than Wake's stumbling, midnight sprints through the woods around Bright Falls. A PC version was started then scrapped, and an episodic XBLA release was mooted then abandoned. Had the team realised how long it would take to escape the darkness, they would have reached for the clicker themselves.


Remedy's creative director Sam Lake cut his teeth on the *Max Payne* series before co-writing the *Alan Wake* script

What really delayed *Alan Wake* for so long? "The biggest mistake we made," Häkkinen admits, "was following a sandbox design. It simply did not fit with our story-driven focus." Originally, the game was an open-world experience set across a huge map with mist-shrouded forests, an eerie lake, power plants and a Twin Peaks-style rural town that players could explore.

Like novelists, game designers need to create their worlds and populate them. Unlike novelists, though, game designers also need to create every tree, shrub and rock that world requires. With that in mind, Remedy sent a research team through Oregon and Washington State and across the border into Canada. They took photos of mountains and lakes, diners and motels, visited the Washington locations where horror movie The Ring was shot, and camped out in the Pacific Northwest's woods.

Even after they returned to Finland with 60,000 photos on their hard drive, they still sent the odd request to their publisher's Seattle offices asking Microsoft to fill in some gaps, according to Häkkinen. "We asked them to take reference photos of shrubs and trees, or to go out into to the woods to record ambient sounds… at night!"

The research fed into the team's tech, including a proprietary world editor featuring a number of procedural tools that evolved out of *Max Payne*'s MaxEd level editor. With only 55 on-site staff at the peak of production, a surprisingly small number for such a sprawling game, Remedy needed to generate environments quickly.

"An unconventional game requires unconventional tools," Häkkinen explains. "We spent lots of effort in the early stages of development creating biotypes that meshed together, based off the research photos we took. Now, if we place a road in the middle of the world, for instance, the system automatically knows not to put trees or grass on the road. It also automatically generates sprouts of grass coming through the edges of the tarmac and [ensures that] the grass type is in line with the vegetation surrounding the road. In addition to that, it'll add gravel and a ditch on the sides of the road. The effort put into making these systems work saved us time later as no post editing was needed, and they allowed our artists to work very efficiently."

As the team built its sandbox prototype, though, it was apparent that something was missing. The freedom to go anywhere robbed the story of its purpose. As any good horror novelist will tell you, the slow creep of dread requires careful pacing. When players can abandon the search for their wife and go off logging instead, it's hard to maintain the requisite atmosphere.

"A thriller is very much like a rollercoaster," Häkkinen says. "You need those build-ups to make the plunges feel all the more exhilarating. We just weren't getting this in a sandbox design because all the game-istic things you need were detracting from the story being the focal point."

Although ditching the sandbox was frustrating, the game benefited. The open-world engine gave this now-linear horror story an agoraphobic feel. Häkkinen: "Because the environments were naturally much larger, we could make reference to things that could be seen in the distance and so foreshadow events. We could create landmarks so the player always had a sense of direction."

It gave a sense of a unified geographical space rather than a collection of separate levels. "Having flexibility within the environments also gave us the opportunity to make any given path as wide or as narrow as we pleased," Häkkinen explains. "It allowed us to play around with gameplay – narrow stealth areas like when the cops are chasing Wake, and wider areas to allow exploration and that sense of: 'Oh shit, I'm lost… what's in the woods?' So, yeah, it resulted in a much better game and it removed the linear feeling on the whole." It also, on a different level, made perfect



Oskari Häkkinen
Head of franchise development, Remedy Entertainment

What ideas did Remedy brainstorm after finishing *Max Payne 2*?
We had some fantastical ideas, like playing with the concept of player death as an integral story element. Another idea was to take the classical road movie and build that into an epic action adventure.

Tell us about working with Navid Khonsari at iNK Stories on *Alan Wake*'s cinematics.
He brings years of experience to the table. He's a steady hand – you want guys like this in your corner when the deadlines are looming and seven different things need to get done *now*. He worked well with the voiceover talent in New York; I think that shows in the great performance from Matthew Poretta as Wake.

***Alan Wake* has spawned live action shorts, a novelisation, and an album. What makes it so transmedia friendly?**
People like to play detective and, by creating knotty or puzzling elements for clever minds to decipher, we can get them really intrigued. If they want to they can peel away more layers. In the Bright Falls preludes there are hidden messages. In the game there are endless gems to be found: listen to the radios, watch the TVs, read the walls. The music created by Poets Of The Fall also has hidden messages. But really it's to do with the talent. When they create lifelike worlds, engaging stories, brilliant music, art and so on, these things start to stand on their own and lend themselves to transmedia.

dramatic sense: a game about a writer should feel authored rather than emergent.

Not many games have an author as their protagonist, let alone a horror novelist suffering writer's block. Dishevelled and unshaven, Wake's an unlikely videogame hero. "He's a bit of a rock star," Lake suggests. "He's troubled, he has this darkness inside him; he has a temper, he's not entirely in control. In the earliest drafts he was more of a victim. But along the way he grew stronger, more active, he got some attitude, and clear flaws, that makes a character interesting."

Ignoring the usual process of sketching concept art for the character, Remedy's design team instead hired actor Ilkka Villi to play Wake in a series of photoshoots and the inevitable motion-capture sessions. Yet the character's essential trait wasn't so much his look as his voice.

For Lake, who'd previously written the *Max Payne* games with their hardboiled monologues, Wake's profession made him unique. "I wanted to find a natural storyteller who could tell his own story, and that made me think about a writer. In a way you are playing the story Wake has written, the mysterious manuscript of a novel, Departure, where he himself is the main character."

With its episodic structure, cliffhangers and 'previously on' recaps, *Alan Wake* makes more than a few nods to TV shows from Lost to Twin Peaks. But it's also a supremely literary game. Stephen King is an obvious inspiration, although there are other influences including Mark Z Danielewski's House Of Leaves – a disorienting, interleaved novel about a strange house in Virginia that's told by a variety of different voices.

"It's one story, but it's many stories at the same time," says Lake, who counts House Of Leaves among his favourite novels. "While those different stories come in different forms and styles, the book still manages to feel like one whole. That's how I see a game. A game is a large entity, and you can fit many things inside it: manuscript pages, radio shows, TV shows, fictional bands and their music, and so on. And they all mirror each other and the main plot, and form one whole."

What difference does it make to have a writer as the hero? Apart from the late sequence where we journey into Wake's imagination, nouns replacing objects onscreen with surreal menace, the game is less about the act of writing than simply surviving. Wake isn't a soldier or space marine; he wears hoodies and elbow-patched tweed jackets, not power armour. He's vulnerable, and that ups the horror stakes. Encounters with the Taken – possessed, inky shades that whisper menacing nonsense like "You're going to miss your DEADline!" – frequently demand flight, not fight.

As you're sprinting blindly towards the next light, the camera often pulls back to reveal a Taken hot on your heels. No wonder Wake's most useful response is his duck'n'dodge move, a slow-mo animation that reinforces how much danger the hero's in. It gives the player an incredible sense of physical peril. Even when you master the core combat mechanics – an innovative combo of using light and projectile weapons – to kick some ass, you rarely feel as powerful as, say, the Master Chief.

The game's horror is more than just visceral chills, however. It's character-driven, too, with a cast of memorable Bright Falls residents emerging from the cutscenes and in-game narrative, from Rose, the over-eager diner waitress with a thing for writers, to the Anderson Brothers, former heavy-metal rockers suffering from dementia. Then there's Barry, Wake's agent, who's never less than utterly OTT. "We had a saying at the office while working on the game," Lake explains. "'Adding Barry to any scene will make it better.'"

He's a fantastic piece of comic relief, a character who can flag up all the craziness that's happening within the game. "It gets awfully gloomy for the player to be stuck in Thrillerville for ten or more hours, and the same is true for the developers," Häkkinen suggests. "Barry is Wake's sidekick, his friend, his literary agent and a New Yorker who hates small towns. On top of that he's got allergies to dust, pollen and grass, so you already see how we created this fish out of water by putting him in Bright Falls. He's a character that you either hate or absolutely love." The Remedy team loved the character so much that they named one of their HQ's meeting rooms in his honour.

***Alan Wake* was** released in May 2010, an Xbox 360 exclusive that billed itself as a psychological action thriller. Its release slot was scarier than anything Stephen King could come up with, hitting shelves on the same day as *Red Dead Redemption* in the US. Initial sales reports showed it selling just 145,000 copies in North America in its first two weeks – compared to *RDR*'s May sales of 1.51 million – a fact described by one online news outlet as a "US sales nightmare".

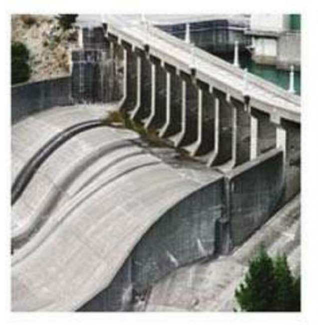
Was it really that bad? "It certainly was a competitive [release] window," Häkkinen says. "We talk about 'bloodbaths' all the time when referring to a window, but there were about six titles that launched on the same day as *Wake*."

But *Alan Wake* has crept over the one million worldwide sales mark, a progression paced at much the same speed as its slow-burn narrative. "Word of mouth has definitely carried *Wake* through, and it's nice to see people still talk about it as a must-play," Häkkinen notes. It's a game that, like its hero, has survived despite the odds.

Remedy isn't a company willing to run from its fears. After all, as Lake believes, legging it never solves anything. "Whether it's writer's block or some other crisis in your life, it doesn't really matter where you go or don't go, because that old log cabin is your head and the dark waters of the lake that surrounds it are the depths of your subconscious mind," he tells us. "The demons that surface from the lake will come knocking and the only way to banish them is to face them and shine a light on them." With follow-up *Alan Wake's American Nightmare* now announced (see p42), it looks like Remedy is willing to step back into the darkness again, ready to light it up. ■









Alan Wake's world draws heavily on real-life references. Model Jonna Järvenpää lent her likeness to Wake's wife Alice (left) while the environments were based on locations in the Pacific North West like Diablo Dam (above left) in the North Cascades

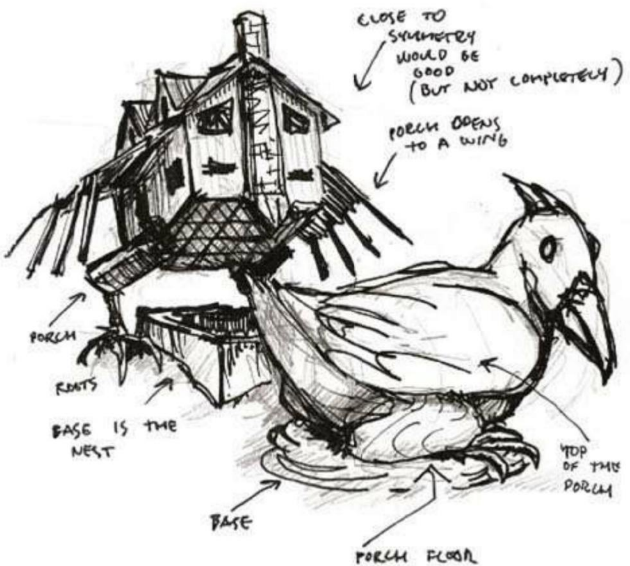


Piece by piece

Microsoft originally planned to release *Alan Wake* as episodic content in two-hour gameplay increments over a series of ten weeks on XBLA, each one 'airing' at the same time each week. Back then, with Lost riding high in the TV ratings, it was a tempting proposition, but sadly the publisher's conservatism eventually trumped innovation. "We played around with various models of delivery," Häkkinen explains. "But, of course, these are business decisions which even Remedy, as the IP holder, doesn't control. I think we were already carrying a lot of risk with *Wake* exclusive on one platform only, plus it was also a new IP. It would have required balls of steel to take on the risks of introducing a new episodic business model too." Microsoft instead followed a traditional retail route, with 'The Signal' and 'The Writer' released as DLC. Interestingly, though, *American Nightmare* is an XBLA exclusive.



Actor Ilkka Villi in Alan Wake guise. Bird Leg Cabin (right) was ditched – it was seen as too 'fairytale' in style





New dimensions

As more devices become capable of displaying 3D graphics, how are engine makers facing up to the challenge?

Crysis 2 from Crytek. "Movie-quality graphics is definitely something that's possible in the next [hardware] cycle," says the studio's Carl Jones

For those who grew up PC gaming in the '90s and early '00s, the launch of a new 3D engine from id or Epic was on a par with that of their latest firstperson shooters. Players grew almost as familiar with the idiosyncrasies and limitations of each engine as developers did, as companies like Raven Software, which used the *Doom* engine (now known as id Tech 1) to create *Heretic* and *Hexen*, and Ion Storm, which built *Deus Ex* with the Unreal Engine, twisted bespoke tech into new shapes.

While Bethesda's acquisition of id means that its much-used tech is now only available to studios under the same publisher, Epic continues to enjoy a growing list of Unreal Engine licensees – the number of games powered by UE now so large that the list warrants its own Wikipedia page. And more recently, Crytek's CryEngine and Valve's Source Engine have been behind an ever-greater number of top-tier games, while Unity Technologies' open model attempts to make powerful 3D rendering accessible, and affordable, to all with Unity 3D.

There are many more commercially available 3D engines besides – Emergent Game Technologies' Gamebryo Lightspeed (behind *Fallout 3* and *Warhammer Online*) and Blitz Game Studios' BlitzTech (behind *House Of The Dead Overkill* and the studio's own Puss In Boots tie-in), to name just two – but the common challenge faced by all 3D engine makers in today's fragmented hardware market is that of supporting an ever-growing number of devices. As gamers play on smartphones and high-end PCs, while consoles stride into their longest generation yet, an inevitable performance gap must be spanned.

"We're in a situation right now where we've probably never had as many, or as broad a variety, of platforms," says Crytek's **Carl Jones**, director of global business development for CryEngine. "That obviously increases the amount of work you need to do to make technology that works for all the platforms, and that gamers want to play on and developers want to build for. But the other thing right now is that the kinds of games that are being developed on those platforms are quite different still.

"I think certainly in the future we'll see similar games being made across multiple devices and you'll be able to run the same quality across all of them. But right now, there's certainly a split in terms of the style of games, and that's led to us being in a situation where you have a certain type of technology requirement at one end and a different type of technology requirement at the other." As a result, Crytek is focusing its efforts on the higher end of the development scale, but it's keeping an eye on other areas of the market.

"I think certainly in the future you'll be able to run the same quality game across multiple devices"

Far from worrying that resources could be spread too thinly, Epic's vice president **Mark Rein** sees the divergence as a positive influence on development. "On the console side, the long hardware cycle has given us time to stretch our wings and make significant improvements within this generation, while on PC, we've been able to address a wide range of platforms – everything from PCs running Flash inside a Web browser up to amazing high-end graphics, which we demoed with Samaritan earlier this year at GDC. It has created an opportunity for Unreal Engine 3 to scale in a way that is unmatched in this industry."

Having an engine that can scale across the full gamut of gaming devices is becoming an increasingly important consideration in order to remain profitable, both for the engine maker looking to court as many potential projects as possible, and for the studio keen to address the widest possible market with its latest game. It's a key trend among engine developers and much of that scalability is being driven, unsurprisingly, by the emergence of smartphones and tablets as a major gaming platform.

"Our ability to provide the best engine for platforms like Flash and PlayStation Vita is because of the groundbreaking work we've been doing on smartphones," eulogises Rein, whose company wowed iOS users with action RPG *Infinity Blade* late last year. "And that



Crysis 2*'s urban environment demonstrates the versatility of CryEngine, which is more usually associated with the vivid landscapes seen in *Far Cry* and the original *Crysis

Flash gun

While Adobe recently pulled out of the mobile race, its newly launched Stage 3D (previously Molehill) API has ensured that Flash remains an attractive platform for game developers on PC.

Unity is adding Flash export to its Unity editor, and earlier this year Epic Games' Tim Sweeney demonstrated Unreal Engine 3 running inside a Flash environment during a keynote at Adobe Max 2011.

Crytek is more cautious in its approach to Adobe's technology, announcing in October that it was looking into Flash and intends to announce a "truly crossplatform solution soon". "Flash is effectively a platform, so it's something we've been dealing with for a while now," Jones explains. "It's not *the* unifying technology, that's probably the main issue – it's just another platform that doesn't quite tick all the boxes.

"If you talk to Web research teams, people looking at the future of the Internet, there's certainly a question mark over HTML5, Flash, WebGL and things like that – which direction is it going to go in? I don't think there's a definite answer yet. So to us, Flash isn't necessarily the ultimate way of doing things, but we're definitely investigating it as a platform for when we come up with our technology to try and deliver to all gamers everywhere."



Panzar Studio's *Forged By Chaos*, based on Warhammer, is an online RPG using CryEngine 3 for its luxurious environments

empowers our licensees to scale to all kinds of previously unimagined platforms like smart TVs and set-top boxes."

"Unity has traditionally been at the lower end of the scale," Jones adds. "But in the same way that they're making moves to upgrade their technologies to try and produce something that's capable of a high-end graphical look, we're definitely looking at what we can do on mobile devices, tablets and other platforms like that."

But what others are already doing in mobile, and indeed browser, games is having a more surprising effect on the way in which 3D engines are designed. The hugely successful free-to-play model is influencing not only the features built in to engines, but also the way that 3D engine companies see their role. While Rein points to the additional plumbing required to support microtransactions and "social media hooks," Jones highlights even more profound shifts.

"Obviously we continue to build on our realtime tools," he explains. "We don't want to end up with massive teams having to work on games in future. We've seen recently how impractical that is: there are some very, very big name studios that have made games that you would think are a success, but actually they're closing down because the sheer cost of making that game was too high. Obviously that's untenable, except for a very small number of games per year.

"But equally, at the lower end of the development scale where you maybe aren't creating such complex games, you're generally delivering more content throughout the lifecycle of the game. If you're trying to create content on a weekly basis, which is quite often necessary in a free-to-play, mobile or casual game, your pipeline to get it out there has to be super-fast and very robust. And that's something we're concentrating on a great deal."

"We knew we'd be building next-gen games with CryEngine 3, so we built it with that in mind"



Madfinger's iOS cover-shooter *Shadowgun* makes use of a raft of Unity features. Chief among these are Light Probes, which allow developers to bake in lighting properties

Crytek will be able to acquire first-hand experience of maintaining a free-to-play game when *WarFace*, which currently has no confirmed release date, is launched. In preparation, the developer is building features in to CryEngine that Jones says will make the whole process of implementing microtransactions simpler. "I think also the whole business of technology providing will change," he says. "We have some ideas about that but we're not ready to talk about them yet."

The shifting business models of the leading 3D engine makers haven't gone unnoticed by Unity Technologies, which is itself looking to embrace larger development studios with its upcoming Unity 3.5 update.

"Unreal and CryEngine are tremendous engines and have done good things; one of them for a long time, and the other more recently," says company founder and CEO **David Helgason**. "But the current trend is that people want to be more like us! [That means] supporting consoles and smartphones, having a long-tail approach to the market and having an open model. A lot of people have pointed it out, and we've noticed it too.

"It's not that they're copying – I'm not saying that. Maybe it's true to some degree, but the world has changed and we were in the right place for that changed world. It's a natural place for companies to go with their business. I don't hold a grudge against them – we've also looked at other engines to see how things can be done and to see how people like to use technology."



Mark Rein
Vice president, Epic



Carl Jones
Director of global business development for CryEngine, Crytek



David Helgason
Founder and CEO, Unity



David Coghlan
Managing director, Havok



***Infinity Blade* shows what's possible on mobile with Epic's engine, bringing visuals more usually associated with consoles**

So how do people like to use technology? Well, one consideration of growing importance is the need to support asyncronicity as more devices are built around multi-core architectures. According to Jones, CryEngine 3 was designed for just such tasks.

"We knew we'd be building next-gen games with it, and so we built it from the ground up with that in mind. So we still stand by the statement we made some years ago that CryEngine 3 is ready to make next-gen games today. You're not going to have to wait a couple of years for a whole new render pipeline to be brought in, or even longer for multi-core support to come in – it's all there now."

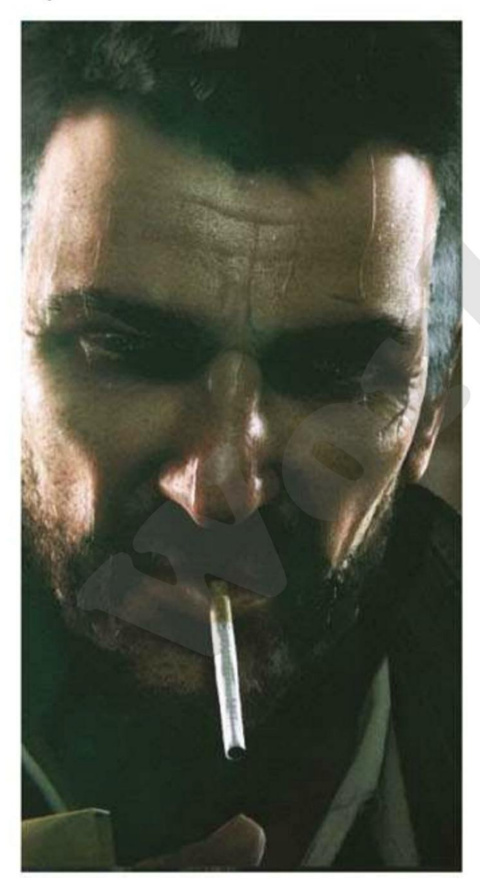
And, talking of pipelines, everyone we talk to agrees on the continued importance of honing the existing ones to enable artists and designers to more easily produce the sheer amount of content needed for today's, and tomorrow's, games. It's a recurring theme with each new

generation of 3D engines, but it's one that remains consistently relevant. "There isn't a magic switch on high-end hardware that makes things look good," Jones says. "You need to give it complex assets."

More crucial to today's engines, though, is an increased propensity to include built-in support for aspects more traditionally handled by middleware components.

"We didn't want to jump into doing features that could be specific to certain games, like pathfinding, particular types of LOD systems and particle systems," Helgason says, "but after waiting it out for a bit, and seeing how people implemented these types of things on top of Unity themselves, we actually started adding them. They might not work for every single game, but I think that's something we're going into and I think other people will do as well."

Crytek chose to build its own in-house physics engine rather than use middleware solutions such as Havok Physics or PhysX, and Jones echoes Helgason's sentiment. "If you're looking at what people want to see from the next generation of games, it's about dynamism, it's about really being able to affect the world around you and see that have an effect on the game. I think people are getting a bit tired of static things in games, and the more dynamic you can make your games look, obviously the more the player believes that they're in a game that they can affect."



Epic's Blade Runner-inspired Samaritan demo shows what can be done with the next generation of Unreal Engine 3 games



Games using Unreal Engine 3 are attacked for all following the same visual formula. A quick look at the list of games powered by it (including *GOW3*, pictured) dispels that myth

So is middleware, the past decade's 'big thing', now facing obsolescence as more engines offer an increasingly broad range of features? "I'm good friends with many of these people, and they're great technologists," Helgason says, "but developers are less willing to [use middleware], I think, now that 3D engines offer more and more features. My sense is that these businesses – not all of them, necessarily, but as a category, for sure – are in trouble. It's kind of sad, because there's some really good stuff coming out of there."

It's not just 3D engines encroaching on middleware companies' territory – middleware providers are looking to expand, too. Havok's recent acquisition of 3D engine provider Trinigy, and its Vision Engine, is a case in point.

"The bar continues to rise in games, but we see a huge amount of innovation on the horizon as well," says Havok MD **David Coghlan**. "I think high-production-value cinematic games, titles like *Battlefield 3*, are pushing that bar again in terms of what people expect from high-octane cinematic titles, and we're absolutely determined to be at the technical forefront of enabling those types of cinematic experiences."

So, as we hurtle into the next era of graphical fidelity, it appears that both the role of engine makers and their products themselves are being redefined by an industry that's unrecognisable compared to the one *Doom*, and its eponymous underlying technology, emerged into in 1993.

"Fewer and fewer people are making their own in-house engines," Helgason says. "The concept never goes away – there's always someone with an in-house engine, and many of them are really good. But they're really expensive to maintain and the smaller the team and the more nimble the project has to be, the harder these are to justify.

"We don't have to feel sorry for the in-house engines – they're not businesses, but they are in trouble in a lot of cases. A lot of people are coming to us with really good in-house engines but wanting to replace them with something outside which will be maintained by somebody else. They can still get source code if they need it, so it's actually the best of both worlds." ■

The cloud

At the other end of the increasingly muddied scale from smartphones is, perhaps, cloud computing, which delivers high-end performance by maintaining powerful hardware remotely from the end user and streaming the application to their device. With cloud providers presumably unrestrained, thanks to economies of scale, by RAM and graphics card concerns, could cloud computing free 3D engine makers from the need to consider the lowest possible device specification?

"Interestingly, scalability is really also the issue on a cloud solution," Jones says. "Games today aren't really made thinking about how they're going to run on a cloud and how to make the best use of that, which means that you can have a real problem from a business sense as players running on those servers increase. It can become extremely expensive.

"If all you're doing is, instead of having a gamer's machine in the gamer's house, putting it in a garage 100 miles away, you're paying for their PC. That isn't scalable. And games running in multiple instances on servers is a challenge that, in our opinion, still hasn't been solved yet. So that scalability is something I think will come.

"But then the clients aren't sitting still either, so to say everything just sits on the server and then you've got this weak little machine running the game is probably not very meaningful when handheld devices are hugely powerful. It would be crazy not to take advantage of those.

"So I think what we have today isn't necessarily the solution that's going to work in the end. But I think if it's done right, and you have games that are played wherever you are on whatever device you want, that connects somehow to your overall gaming experience within that game's universe, that's a winner. And I think a lot of people will be looking forward to those kinds of gaming experiences, and the cloud definitely has a part to play in that."

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The power of the 'A' word

Words that trigger an emotional reaction beyond their physical meaning fascinate me. Brain studies suggest that this kind of reaction occurs at a biological level. Scans have shown emotional areas of people's brains lighten or darken depending on whether they are hearing words that affirm or disavow their political views. They physically respond.

In any debate, a set of trigger words tends to emerge. 'Storytelling' is a word in design circles that triggers reactions. 'Social games' is the trigger term for some groups of self-described gamers.

I suspect that game designers have a trigger word which I shall call the 'A' word for now. If you want to get down-voted on various gaming Reddits then you should blog about the 'A' word. If you want get mired in a circular debate with academics over definitions, write an essay about the 'A' word. If you want to have game fans on forums complain that games are supposed to be fun, then start a thread about the 'A' word. And if you want to get designers to speculate about going beyond fun with games, the 'A' word is where you should begin.

The 'A' word has this effect because it's a small word with big shoes. It's been around since the dawn of language and yet tends to remain difficult to pin down. It's perceived as a grown-up's word, a word reflecting society's hierarchical culture, stuffy professors and pretentious critics. Yet it is actually used in dozens of contexts.

I don't want games to stop being fun. I want studios to naturally think of themselves as creators rather than problem solvers. I want them to think of their industry as cultural rather than technological and, while that probably sounds obvious to any writer, musician, sculptor or painter who might happen to read this, in the world of games I've only met perhaps five people who think that way.

The 'A' word is, of course, 'art'. Games are an art. Not one day, not when they get more sophisticated or grow up. Now. And game makers are artists. American writer Rita Mae Brown said: "Art is moral passion married to entertainment. Moral passion without entertainment is propaganda, and entertainment without moral passion is television." Her compatriot Seth Godin said: "Art is made by a human being. Art is created to change someone else. Art is a gift. Most art has nothing to do with oil paint or marble."



Game makers still want to talk about technologies and innovations. They're not ready for the 'A' word

When I use the word 'artist' I don't mean jobs in the industry involving modelling, textures, concept sketching or lighting. Nor do I mean 'sanctioned by the powers that be' or 'funded by government'. I mean in the same sense that musicians use the term 'recording artist'. I mean 'maker'. But moral passion? Created to change someone else? A gift? You might rightly wonder why any of that matters, and whether it all sounds pretentious.

It matters because studios need to stop thinking like software developers. Developers are engineers who solve problems like building bridges and tunnels. They are somewhat utilitarian by nature, and so they obsess on innovation.

The first 30 years of commercial game development were the founderwork years. It was the age in which most of the rules of good games were uncovered and many industry legends were born. Today, there's little left to be discovered. The rate of significant innovation has slowed and is increasingly about interfaces and delivery mechanisms rather than games themselves. So every game is just another version of a previous game. Seen it, played it, got bored of it.

A utilitarian attitude is a little like thinking that because one painter figured out how to paint a landscape, all landscapes are the same. Games attract players for more qualitative reasons than that. They have character and identity, cultural weight and meaning. They are a source of self-identification. They are now productions and franchises with legions of sophisticated fans.

That's not the kind of landscape in which utilitarianism can thrive. Developers for whom making games is an extended science project are increasingly less attractive because games are not bridges and tunnels. They're cultural products, and cultural products are made rather than discovered.

Of course not all landscape paintings are the same. Some are pedestrian, some are decorative and some are innovative. Then there are masterworks. Masterworks use all the knowledge of innovation that came before them, but they reach for something higher. In an environment that wants masterworks, utilitarian ideas will not do.

The game industry looks less like a founderwork industry than ever, but it seems hesitant to leave its past behind. Game makers still call themselves developers and still want to talk overwhelmingly about technologies and innovations, bridges and tunnels. They're not ready for the 'A' word; it's still too sensitive.

So can we go as far as the 'C' word (culture) instead? If we can think of games in terms of culture instead of science, might we be able to see over our utilitarian roots? Are we ready to label ourselves 'makers', and maybe a few years later we can give that 'A' word a chance?

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com

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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Basketball without physics

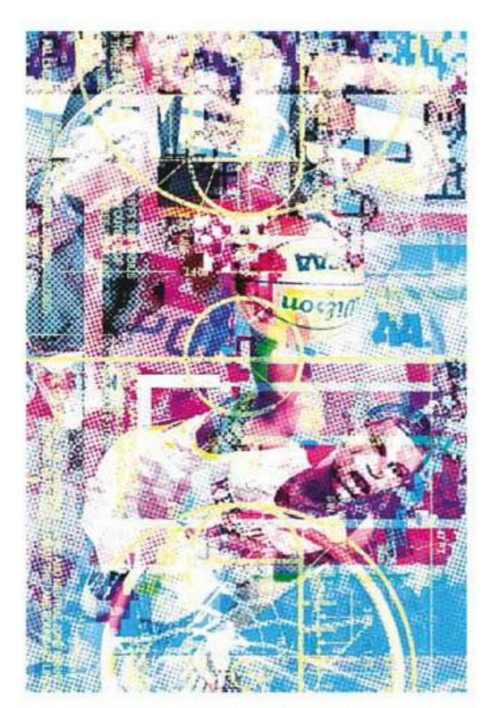
Recently, I have spent a great deal of my time thinking about prototyping, and as one of the faculty members of Marc LeBlanc's Game Design Workshop at GDC, I am privileged to get to help other game developers think about it too. I am a big believer in the process of breaking down a design to find the element that you need to prove, disentangling it from the rest of the game design, and making quick-and-dirty prototypes that help you find the engaging core of a system so that you can iterate it forward. But this process has limits.

An often-encountered problem in prototyping is what I call the 'basketball without physics' problem. Imagine for a moment that basketball does not exist, and you wanted to invent it. At its core, basketball is the same as many other team sports: there are two teams, there is an object that needs to cross an invisible plane in space in order to score points, and there is an invisible box that defines the legal play area. It is essentially the same game as hockey, football, rugby or lacrosse – yet it is obviously incredibly different.

To invent basketball, you might start from an existing game, such as football, and set some new aesthetic goals. For example, you might want the game to be faster paced, with more scoring so that it is harder to hold a lead. You might start with a couple of obvious rule changes: making the field much smaller, forcing players to play with their hands instead of their feet, reducing the number of players on each team and removing the goalkeeper.

Then what would you do? Well, you would play the game. You'd grab a ball, have players run around a room throwing it to one another, and trying to throw the ball in the unprotected net. Over the course of many hours, you would likely evolve new mechanics that kept the game running smoothly and reinforced your aesthetic goals. Rules like dribbling, a shot clock, the three-point line and the concept of the key would appear somewhat naturally as you tried to find the fun.

Now, imagine for a moment that you still wanted to invent basketball, but that physics was not a given. A talented designer might reasonably guess that a faster, more dynamic game would arise by starting from football and making the field smaller, forcing players to use their hands, reducing team size, and removing goalies – but then what? How would you discover you needed rules like dribbling, or the shot clock? The answer is, you wouldn't.



The current emphasis on physical reality massively constrains the kinds of games we can design and build

In order to evaluate if the high-level rules of basketball are fun and serve the aesthetic goals, the low-level rules of physics are a requirement.

When trying to 'find the fun' in higher-level game systems, you first need to have an underlying systemic 'toy'. That toy may or may not be fun in and of itself. Physics is only a marginally fun toy, for example, but there are many great games that have been built atop of the robust foundational toy of physics.

It should be pointed out, however, that physics is not the only systemic toy upon which fun games can be built. Probability fields, such as those forged by the colours, numbers and suits in a deck of cards, and the stochastic patterns that emerge from mixing those cards up, are another well-known toy upon which many great games are built. In fact, there is a literal infinity of foundational systemic toys upon which meaningful games can be built, yet for the most part, the game industry focuses on building baseline game engines that simulate one single toy that is proven to only be marginally fun: physical reality.

The current emphasis on games whose foundational toy is the movement and action of physically simulated agents in 3D environments is problematic because it massively constrains the kinds of games we can design and build. There are virtually no games in existence built upon the foundational toy of 'knowledge and secrets and their flow through trust relationships' as one example. Sadly, we also happen to know that foundational toy is much, much more inherently compelling than the toy of physical reality.

In the big-budget game development business, when we imagine the possibilities of all of the games that we could make, and then we set out to attempt to prototype them, we are very frequently handicapped or even blocked entirely by the dearth of toys that allow us to begin making anything more than variations on the high-level rules of Capture The Flag. This is unfortunate, because frankly, I would love to play a game about knowledge and secrets and their flow through trust relationships... and I guarantee you there would not be many 13-year-olds repeatedly owning my ass in those games.

In the indie game space, where building accurate simulations of physical space is made almost impossible by the cost of content development, there is ironic hope. Indies don't have the handicap of having to start with a foundational toy that tightly constrains the kind of game they can make. They have the advantage – but also the incredible challenge – of having to build their own physics before they can even begin to imagine the beauty of basketball.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space

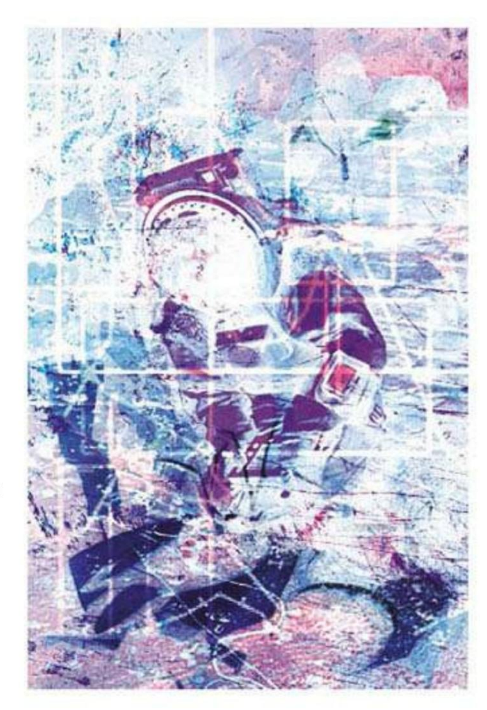


RANDY SMITH

A light in the darkness

From this vantage I observe even the far reaches of the enormous cave chamber. Translucent waterfalls tumble out of darkness overhead, spatter off expanses of limestone and hiss into the glowing plane of magma below. Everywhere is life and activity. Huge alien plants eject seeds which are snatched in midair by dive-bombing creatures, now sailing back to their nests clutching the prize. A floating seed drifts serenely, seeking fertile terrain above, only to become ensnared in a predator's sticky tendrils. Noticing a problem, I jetpack down to chase a swarm of them away from their feast. My fix is to plant one of their natural enemies, which when grown to maturity I quickly dodge away from. In fact, every lifeform here is created by the player; nothing is alive when they first enter. Now that the ecosystem has awakened, a spectrum of valid reactions is supported, from destructive to nurturing, each provoking a systemic consequence. I feel the warmth of pride. We intended moments like this, but it's still a welcome surprise when they present themselves. What I'm responding to is deeper than gameplay. Though nascent, this scenario manages to capture something important to me, a reflection of what we put into it. But will it work for anyone else? Will it become more than the sum of its parts or just a flashy curiosity?

For *Waking Mars*, our in-progress game, we've worked hard to make our environments stunning and cram the game with interesting ideas, but images and plots can be shallow and fleeting. Those passages in a novel you run your mind over and over, those scenes of a movie you can't stop contemplating, the amorphous feeling of weightiness when the story ends, those to me are the indicators of artistic meaning. Is meaning the same as message? Our playtesters feel they're noticing a message, but it's not one we put in there, and in fact they report different variations. *Waking Mars* is about bringing a planet to life, but it does not intentionally express anything about the perils of terraforming or polluting the one world we occupy. I have opinions about these subjects but no interest in articulating them through a game. At least not directly, not consciously. Pedantic works have conclusions, written by people who know things to be facts. I prefer material that generates conversations, created by people who have questions. The message, if any, should be a dialogue, expressing multiple perspectives. If being pretty and interesting isn't enough, what qualities must a game have to become worthy of interpretation?



We intended moments like this, but they're still a welcome surprise. What I'm responding to is deeper than gameplay

We joke that sometimes our game plays itself, but I see this as a necessary truth. It wouldn't be honest if the player had to grow every plant. Real-life ecosystems maintain themselves, or they go extinct. That's what I believe. The emergent states of equilibrium, the vectors of propagation: that's what fascinates me about ecosystems, and since 'ecosystem' is a core theme, those characteristics must be present. And when it comes to tuning the simulation, honesty is more important than traditionally balanced gameplay. Within whatever its particular universe of fact and tone winds up being, the game should never deviate, fudge or slip. I think this works because even truth is relative, so when you start with a premise and faithfully follow your honest impulse, you wind up generating a human perspective where you thought you were regurgitating plain facts.

But that's very intellectual. Are ecosystems something to have emotions about? For me, yes, there is a sacredness to the interconnected cast that lives in a single tree or puddle, a sense that each member plays a small but important part, much like we each do in the ecosystems we inhabit. What is the value of these small pools of life? How should we feel when we cut down a tree, or when a bulldozer drives through a puddle? Is that different to a family of baby birds freezing in a late spring frost? These are questions I don't have answers for, just thoughts and feelings of the sort I hope our game is able to evoke. Meaning, I think, requires some intertwining of the left and right brains, must both depict an idea and provoke an emotional reaction to it.

I recently heard Phil Fish of Polytron talk about the almost-released *Fez*, and was struck by how fluently he was able to discuss his theories about the fourth dimension and philosophies of perspective, themes that on one level barely seem to poke their heads into *Fez*, and on another level are clearly the material which give it substance. It affirmed my faith in creating meaning simply by being honest to one's interests and passions, even though the process is organically directionless. I wasn't clear what *Spider* amounted to until someone else described it: the tokens you leave behind will be all that represent you when you're dead. What will people think when they find them? It's no universal message, but it's real, and that's how it got there. I don't mean to over-represent *Waking Mars* either; it's still in-progress, and similarly not feverishly bent toward some specific expression. But we did deliberately add the ingredients – inspiration, honesty, thematic consistency – so with luck I won't be the only one finding meaning in the final product.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *will be released in January 2012*

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Swords and sorcery… and a banking crisis

Recently I've been immersed in the world of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games. Writing, not playing, you understand. I've seen and heard about people who play them. What happens to their faces and, a bit behind their faces, their minds. Yes, I've seen and shuddered and kept away.

But I need to put steam on the table so when I was invited to discuss working on one I said yes. And so it was that I was welcomed to the usual anonymous office populated with posters and cardboard standees. Tons of dinosaurs and Lego surrounding every monitor, and one female artist. And, of course, the stubbled creative director with a first name that isn't a real name, like Jof or Tib.

What these people wanted, they told me, is to fill their MMORPG with stories and richness, but without letting the players know. It all had to be hidden yet discoverable. Rather than being thrust into obvious quests and tales, players would scratch the surface of the seemingly innocuous and would discover rewarding wonders within.

While doing this, they'd also be slaying each other and screaming into mics at highly adept, mocking children in America. It didn't want to stray too far from its MMORPG roots, after all.

I was quite intrigued by the idea. It certainly sounded better than the 'collect ten corpses and bring them to the wizard' quests which shine out as beacons of rubbish in so many of these sort of games. Plus there's the idea that, if you discover a particularly well-hidden quest, others won't and you'll end up with something they don't have. And if that translates to a pile of slain characters at your feet belonging to highly adept, mocking American children, everyone wins.

We talked about this around a glass table in a meeting room with coffee, brought by the only other female in the office. I was pleased to see the standard bookcase with a single award on top of it, shelves filled with dozens of copies of the same DS game and nine books on C++.

And the talk was good. These guys wanted to know whether players want quests, overarching stories or just total freedom to do whatever they like with no sense of it leading to anything apart from their increasing dominance over others. Basically, do people want it to be like real life?



Do players want total freedom to do whatever they like with no sense of it leading to anything – like real life?

Of course, ask 50 MMORPGers and you'll get 40 different answers (because ten won't speak or make eye contact with you). But, we decided, the idea which seems to work the best is that there does need to be a big, unfolding tale. An end result. Something which, ultimately, needs to be resolved. It all has to mean something.

"It's like religion," I said. They all stared at me blankly. It's not really like religion at all. I'd had a brain fart. But for some people, when you play a MMORPG you want to be better (or badder) than everyone else and you want recognition. You want to win, not only against everyone else, but against the game.

I was as happy as a writer could be. Sometimes the stars align like this, and you get people with good ideas, who like your ideas, and who seem happy to sit and listen while you, not quite believing that they're not interrupting, keep talking. I even think the phrase "in the zone" was used at one point, by someone who amazingly didn't get their head stoved in immediately afterwards.

Then came phase two. I had been happily wittering on about swords and crystals and dormant energy and thrones and bloodlines, but these guys had been sitting on an idea. Chairs were shuffled closer to the glass table and they told me what they really wanted.

Their MMORPG was to mirror events in the real world. Yes, there would be swords and magical ice storm spells and thieves and traps, but there'd also be a banking crisis. Dictators needing to be swept from power. Lax border controls and disgraced heads of state.

The idea would be to constantly review the news and to create modules which players could experience, and which were based on the breaking or recently broken stories. What, in effect, they were talking about was the world's first satirical MMORPG. Desperate to get a handle on it, I asked them whether they envisaged players storming into a sea of tents outside a financial institution and laying waste to the protestors with broadswords. It turns out they wanted more of a reasoned approach. Player-on-player violence was fine, as was massacring non-human NPCs, but the current affairs elements were to be portrayed and handled with sensitivity.

I excused myself and went and slumped in their toilet for a while. Upon my return it became apparent that they'd taken their ideas further. They now proposed a mode in which players would enter a chamber, leaving their staffs, swords and axes at the door, and would co-operate to try and solve the issues of the day. Robust debate and compromise would lead to implementable resolution, although at any stage a player could leave, collect his weaponry and re-enter the goblin-killing, child-fending-off world outside.

Driving home, I stopped the car and sat on a hill near Andover for quite a long time.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online


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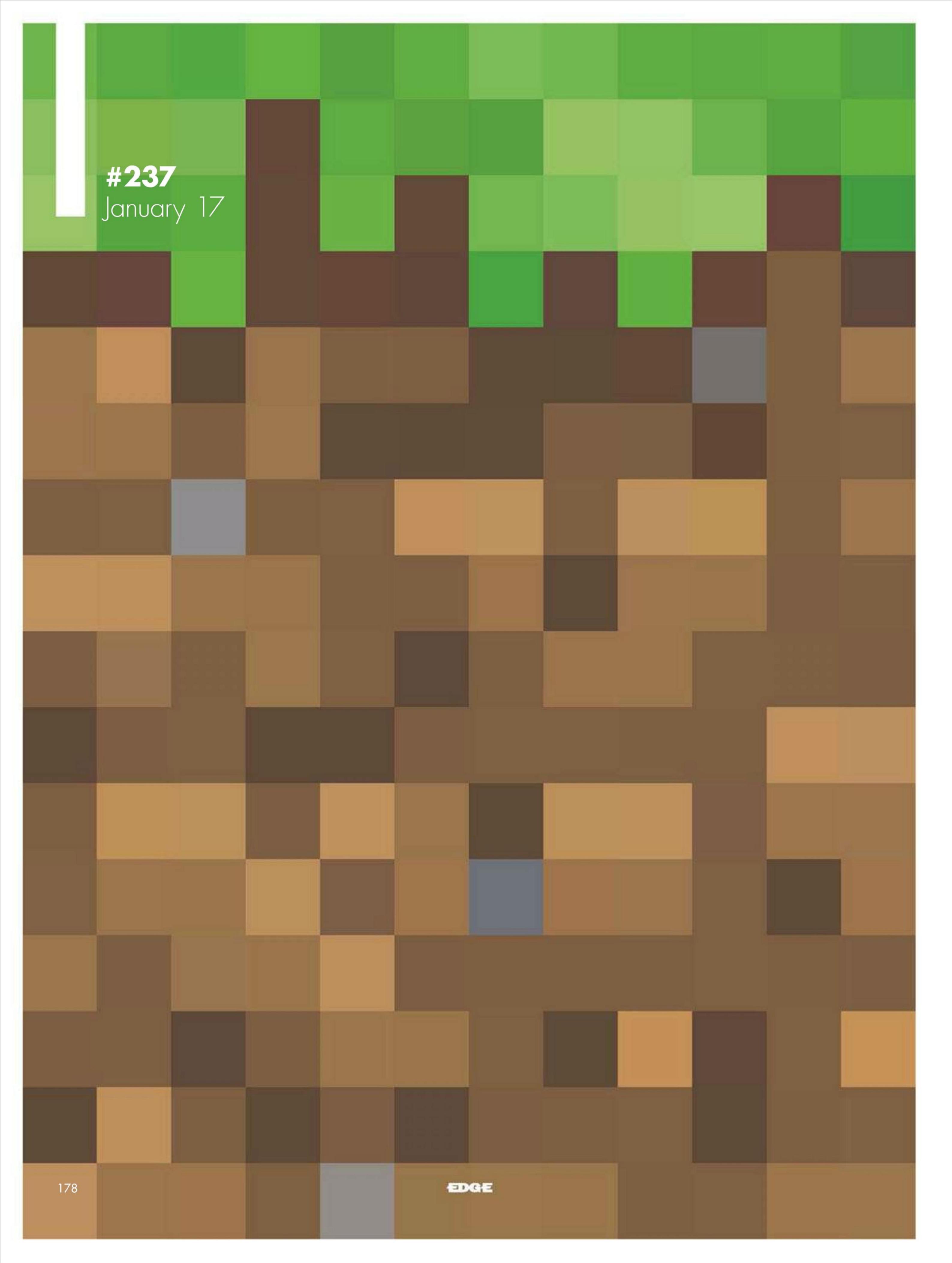
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